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# ESSAY ON GENIUS;

OR, THE

## Philosophy of Literature.

BY

JOHN DUNCAN.

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## PREFACE.

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IN the following treatise, the author offers a new theory of GENIUS, and has endeavoured to fix a *certain* standard for judging of intellectual ability. How far he has succeeded, the public will judge. All that he requests is their attention, trusting that the importance of the subject will form a sufficient apology for obtruding himself upon their notice.

In enforcing opinions not generally received, he has been under the necessity of



entering more deeply or abstrusely into the subject, than he otherwise would have done; but he flatters himself the illustrations he has given, will render his positions obvious, even to those least accustomed to think on such subjects.

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AN  
ESSAY  
ON  
GENIUS;  
OR, THE  
PHILOSOPHY OF LITERATURE.

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CHAPTER I.

THE TRUE DIGNITY OF MAN CONSISTS IN MENTAL EXCELLENCE; AND DIFFERENCE OF MIND IS THE ONLY REAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEN.

MORAL science may be divided into three branches :—the theory of *Evidence*; the theory of *Morality*; and the scale of *Ability*.

The two former are considered as the more important. The latter has, indeed, been treated more as a subject of fancy than of science, and hence the many errors which prevail upon it.

Among the chief of these are those poetical rather than philosophical ideas, by which the mind is divided into a number of faculties, each inhabiting its own cell, and having no connection with another. The faculties of the mind are, in general, said to be *judgment, memory, imagination, &c.*; but their number seems capable of no other limitation than the arbitrary will of the person who makes the division.

The usual consequence of philosophical enquiry is to unite a multitude of phænomena or facts under one denomination. It may, therefore, be presumed, that this multiplication of faculties arises from limited views, and that a more extensive enquiry would trace them to a common origin.

The following Treatise is intended to prove the *unity* of the intellectual powers. We hope to be able to produce the most satisfactory proof, that the seeming diversity of mental faculties arises from the various objects and circumstances to which the mind is directed; and that these, however differ-

ent, induce no change on the intellect itself.

In treating of GENIUS, or the various degrees of human ability, we ought, in the first place, to endeavour to ascertain whether there exists any original difference between the intellect of one man and that of another, arising from the peculiar nature of the mind itself; or whether all difference of mental talent does not proceed from the influence of external circumstances, including among these the effects of constitution. In this case, however, research must, in one respect, prove fruitless. Mental and physical operations are so intimately blended, that we can never discover the exact degree of influence to be ascribed to the mind or to the body. Taking it for granted that the mind is different from the body,<sup>1</sup> although whe-

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<sup>1</sup> We have equal evidence for the existence of that assemblage of qualities called the mind, as for the existence of that called matter. The most distinguishing property of the mind is the susceptibility of pleasure and pain; of matter, exten-



ther or not is immaterial to this enquiry ; yet, as the former never acts separately from the latter, it is impossible to discover if it possesses any peculiarities arising from its own nature or not. But while all mental capacity may be referred to the nature of the constitution, as well as to the strength of the mind, it is remarkable that intellectual deficiency may be ascribed to the former of these causes. While sedateness of temper fixes us to ideas, it may also obstruct their conception ; and while vivacity enables us to receive impressions, it may prevent us from attending to them.<sup>2</sup>

A multitude of causes concur, however, to prove the important fact of the existence of some original difference of ability, arising either from the peculiar nature of the mind

sion. These qualities appear so different, that not even a comparison can be drawn between them. The most judicious, therefore, have held them to belong to distinct substances, if such a thing as substance exists.

<sup>2</sup> Both reasons are given for the intellectual deficiency of brutes.

or the body, but most probably from that of the former. We find one man more susceptible of education, naturally more penetrating and distinct, and capable of carrying his ideas farther, than another. We may, therefore, safely admit two species of *ability*; the *natural*, and the *acquired*.

This original difference of talent does not, however, seem great. In nature there are no prodigies. The various species are connected by gradual links, and the varieties of any particular species confined to narrow limits. The difference of intellectual ability is not, in all probability, naturally greater than that of stature. Yet this difference is important; and if the influence of external circumstances be added, is sufficient to account for the most extraordinary instances of genius which have appeared in the world. The effect of cultivation on the mind is great—the power of industry immense. The most splendid talents are, therefore, perhaps nothing more than those lucky habits which correspond with excellence.



Connected with the subject of genius there is one point left in the most vague and unsatisfactory state, and which it may not be improper to settle here; that is, personal dignity, or that *greatness* which has been so much talked of, and so little understood. Personal greatness may be of two kinds. It may arise either from the possession of great talents, or of some other quality which has an important influence on the happiness of mankind. The latter species again may suffer division into great actions, and great possessions. The first of these may be considered as better evidence of superior talents than the second, though neither can be considered as good.

But, if the mind be held as different from the body, *intellectual ability* can be viewed as constituting the only real personal dignity. All other is to be looked upon as fictitious; and the term *great*, as applied to it, an instance of the abuse of words.

Mankind are, indeed, sensible of the charms of intellectual importance, and that

wisdom and knowledge constitute human greatness. Every person prefers the reputation of ability to that of virtue, and would suffer the imputation of vice rather than of folly ;—every person is sensible that to improve his mind is to raise him in the scale of existence, and that to increase intellectual acquisition is the only means of exalting a reasonable being.

Adventitious and extrinsic qualities are, however, often confounded with personal, and the things possessed taken for the possessor. Thus, a king is called great, because he has the direction of every thing important to a considerable portion of mankind, and the means of rendering many happy or miserable ; although, at the same time, in intellectual qualities, he may be inferior to the majority of his subjects.

There is certainly a greatness of things, as well as of minds, because there are differences among them ; but we can never acquire a title to their importance. External objects can, by no mode of possession, be

assimilated to the intellect, nor can they, to any great extent, even fall within our power, or minister to our enjoyment. In whatever manner a person may apply wealth, or exercise authority, it can produce merely refinement of those pleasures which are common to all mankind ; for nature always constrains him to remain within those precincts which she has assigned to individuals ; and he can be great to others only, as an inanimate object can be, by forwarding, or obstructing, their happiness.

Those who hold elevated situations attract our attention more by the splendour of their rank than by their ability, and it is rather their station and circumstances which we admire than themselves. Even heroes and conquerors, and the majority of those characters which appear in the roll of fame, must be considered only as marking those revolutions which are continually happening from the motion of things, and as indicating great events rather than great minds. For it is obvious to the slightest reflection, that, in



this case, opportunity holds the first rank, ability only the second, and that Darius might have been Alexander had he commanded an army of Grecians.

No one feels himself satisfied with regard to the abilities of the powerful and successful, from the evidence of power and success alone. We still wish to have an opportunity of judging of them by their conversation, or literary attempts, which are the best means of obtaining a perfect knowledge of the mind. Literature is the fairest test of mental ability, and real greatness; because no fortuitous cause can assist the labours of the mind, or whatever assistance an author derives from circumstances can easily be perceived and made allowance for: But to judge of any person's intellectual powers by those actions in which he has been engaged, is a very remote manner of estimating their value. Events form but an imperfect index to the mind, and we often take good fortune for capacity. A general may be victorious by the advice, care, or ability of his officers;

by the superior number or spirit of his men ; by the neglect of his antagonist ;<sup>3</sup> by the advantages of his situation ; or by a thousand other circumstances which are neither dependant on him, nor perceivable by others. A statesman again may be successful from the temperature of the times, or the concurrence of causes which are unconnected with his determinations, and over which he has no control.

Success is not the same in literature as in life. In the former, it must depend upon ourselves ; in the latter, it may depend upon things. Many men also, from particular habits and constitutional peculiarities, are not prudent in proportion to their capacity. The talents, therefore, of such, suffer great injustice among those who judge by the event. We are, in general, so much dazzled

3 The world is filled with characters whose celebrity depends upon the deficiency of their antagonists. It is also a vulgar error to ascribe so much to generalship. Discipline may be necessary as a subordinate cause ; but, in all battles, victory is chiefly decided by courage.



by the lustre of great events, that the conduct of every person, when fortunate, seems wise. Each accidental success, whether proceeding from coincidence of circumstances, or peculiarity of character, is ascribed to wisdom and deliberate design; while, on the contrary, it is difficult to save the reputation of the unfortunate, even among the most impartial.<sup>4</sup> But those who wish justly to estimate characters, will endeavour to divest themselves of this prejudice. They will judge of men rather by their reasoning than by their conduct, and examine more their understandings than their passions; for, as there are many persons who can think but cannot act, prudence of conduct, and those talents best adapted to active scenes, will perhaps be found to depend more upon constitutional character than upon deliberative wisdom.<sup>5</sup>

4 The difference between a mad attempt and a glorious action depends upon success.

5 Human nature is, no doubt, composed of body as well as of mind, and active faculties are, perhaps, as important as contemplative; but still it is necessary to keep them sepa-

Success would, indeed, be a mark of superior abilities, could it be shown that it were independent of concurring circumstances, and that the difficulties surmounted were great ; but, in active concerns, so many causes, different from personal talent, have an influence, that no conclusion drawn from them can, with regard to the mind, be depended on. There may, indeed, sometimes, be degrees of real greatness in the merit of rising in the world ; but there is oftener nothing more than good fortune, or a cast of character, which coincides with the situation of things and the dispositions of men.

To succeed in life, the most probable means is to go with the stream. Worldly wisdom consists, not in thinking justly or acting reasonably, according to extensive views, but in humouring the times. Servility is, in general, the shortest road to preferment ; and intrigue, in most cases, an

rate. The maxim, “ judge of a person by his actions and not by his words,” must apply to morals rather than to ability.

overmatch for ability.<sup>6</sup> An artful man regards the end more than the means, and depends, for success, upon pliancy rather than talent; while a person of ability, judging of mankind by himself, imagines that merit is all that is necessary to acquire consideration, and values himself upon his integrity and independence. A man of sense naturally perceives the beauty of noble and praise-worthy actions; and genius is generally accompanied by an inflexible pride of sentiment, and propensity to integrity and honourable conduct. Besides, where there are strong ideas and great vigour of mind, there are commonly strong passions and ungovernable opinions. Mental exertion, therefore, often impels to actions inconsistent with the ordinary progress of things.

Those who are most successful in life, frequently possess a contractedness of mind which renders it suitable to all circumstances,

<sup>6</sup> What are, indeed, the boasted dissimulation and art of politicians, but falsehood and dishonesty?



confines its powers to a narrow circle, and concentrates them always at the point of action. The common business of life is chiefly managed by habit and imitation, and a talent for it is often the emblem of a small mind. The great employment of mankind is to live. Industry, therefore, will always be more valued than capacity. But, perhaps, rank and riches are oftener determined by the circumstance of birth than by any extraordinary exertion or ability.

Even the possession of virtue, which is much more valuable than either power or riches, cannot confer greatness on any one; and it is a misapplication of terms to bestow the appellation of *great* upon a person entitled only to that of *good*.<sup>7</sup> Virtue is merely a habit of the mind, or a species of education which is useful to mankind. Virtue, therefore, can display no extent of

<sup>7</sup> Pope says, "An honest man is the noblest work of God." This has a fine sound, but nothing more. There is a cheat in common morality of which every candid person must be ashamed.

thought, or intricacy of ideas. Men are prone to flatter each other for qualities which are useful or pleasing, and hence arises their profusion of commendation to those who are virtuous ; but if we suppose the mind in itself unchangeable, its original force can neither be encreased by virtue nor diminished by vice—affected by praise nor dispraise. All the greatness of which man is capable belongs neither to his habits nor other circumstances, but to his understanding ; and he who possesses such greatness can, by no concurrence of things, be deprived of it.

Intellectual talents, however, are not oftener unjustly degraded, than exalted, by foreign causes ; and we have generally occasion to be on our guard against imposition of one species or another. Of this class is reputation, derived from inflated sentiment, such as the saying of Alexander, that he would contend at the Olympic games, if kings were his competitors.<sup>8</sup> This is univer-

<sup>8</sup> By which he evidently meant to contend in rank and not in skill, and to oppose adventitious qualities to personal.



sally termed magnanimity, but is merely vanity, or conceit ; and such conduct always receives that appellation in those who hold inferior stations in life. Passions and habits ought, however, to be distinguished from judgment. Greatness of mind consists only in the superior power of discrimination,—not in admiring or despising, loving or hating, of which all men are equally capable.

Nothing is indeed truly important in human nature, but mental ability. By the original force of mind which men derive from nature is their future greatness entirely determined ; for what men do not accomplish by the power of their minds, must be ascribed to some foreign quality from which they can claim no merit.

On the same native superiority depends, in the first instance, the extent of that improvement which is not the least remarkable peculiarity of the human understanding, and which serves chiefly to distinguish mankind from the lower ranks of the creation. The inferior animals, as they are evidently in-

tended to act within a narrow circle, soon acquire reason sufficient for it, and reach the limits of their cultivation. The minds of beasts are so incapable of abstraction, and their perceptions arise so immediately from their senses, that they attain maturity along with their bodies ; and as soon as their instincts are complete, their understandings have arrived at their perfection. But the human mind contains higher powers, and admits of greater extension ; for, after the means of information which the senses furnish are exhausted, it retains the power of increasing its knowledge by its own inherent exercise. The perfection of the mind of man does not depend upon the maturation of his senses, but on that of experience ; and his mental faculties are capable of improvement as long as they continue to be exercised.

The expansion of the intellect is, indeed, liable to be affected by those casualties which influence its exertion ; and minds are ren-

dered different not less by education than by nature.

Yet circumstances never actually affect the original degree of ability. As all education is but information concerning the state of things, they can only assist or retard its developement. But before entering on the subject of education, it may be proper to say something on the nature of external objects, and those qualities which occasion intellectual exertion.



## CHAPTER II.

ONE IDEA EQUAL TO ANOTHER;—SUBJECTS DIFFER  
ONLY IN COMPLEXITY.

ONE idea is not more difficult of conception than another. The idea of a mountain and the idea of a grain of sand are conceived with equal ease. The mind is affected only by the relation of qualities; continuity and uniformity are indifferent to it. It is not magnitude but number—the separation and division of things—which engages its attention, and furnishes the materials of its operation. All our ideas are merely intellectual properties called into exercise by the suggestion of external objects. They are all equally abstracted from physical objects, and occupy, it may be said, for the sake of illustration, the same portion of the mind.

All subjects are, therefore, more or less difficult of comprehension, merely as they contain a greater or less number of different parts, and furnish many or few ideas; and all things possess complexity only as they possess variety. Thus, in viewing an extensive building, it is not the same to the mind as to the eye. The operation of the eye may be obstructed by the physical difficulties of vision, such as light or shade, by intervening objects, or by the extent and magnificence of the fabric: But the difficulty of the mind must be the labour of selecting its various parts, of removing their confusion, and arranging them according to their natural dependance upon each other. However extensive any object may be, or however far any landscape may spread, or edifice extend, it may still be easy of conception; for, if all its parts be the same, they are but as one part; and without diversity there can be no discrimination.

What is great in nature is not always difficult to the mind. Notwithstanding the



suffrage of Longinus, there appears no uncommon degree of talent in the passage,—

“ Far as a shepherd from some point on high,  
O'er the wide main extends his boundless eye,  
Thro' such a space of air, with thund'ring sound,  
At one long leap th' immortal coursers bound ;”

Nor in his attempt to surpass it, when he says,—“ and who, considering the superlative magnificence of this thought, would not, with good reason, cry out, that if the steeds of the Deity were to take a second leap, the world itself would want room for it.”<sup>9</sup>

Physical and moral importance are very different from intellectual. *Physical* consists in *quantity* ; *moral* in *event* ; and *intellectual* in *number*. Things may be both physically and morally important, without being intellectually important ; that is, an object may be extensive, or an event violent, without

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<sup>9</sup> Nothing is so cheap and vulgar as descriptions of extension or magnitude. To such contentions as that between Longinus and Homer, there is no end. However great any object may be, it is easy to conceive a greater.

being complex. Physical importance, for the most part, regulates moral importance, but never intellectual.

The view which the mind takes of objects is, however, sometimes arbitrary or accidental. It may either view many things as one, or one thing as many. Thus, an army may be considered in whole, or with relation to the individuals composing it; but the difficulty of conception will always be in proportion to the number of ideas. Sometimes the reduction of any set of ideas to a single idea, is accomplished by a long process of reasoning. Simplification is, in fact, the object of all science, and one of the modes in which genius is best displayed. But although it may be difficult to reach a conclusion, it is, when attained, easily understood. The natural progress of the mind, however, is, first, to view all objects which the senses can grasp, as single, and afterwards to examine more minutely their parts in detail.

As magnitude is unconnected with diffi-

culty of conception, there appears no quality in ideas which dignifies one more than another. Thus the distinction of high and low wit arises merely from confounding material qualities with mental; for wit is the same, on every subject, in proportion as it discovers excellence of thought. Such a distinction belongs merely to the objects alluded to, and forms no application to the efforts of the mind; for, considered intellectually, there can be no difference between the apophthegm of the peasant and that of the courtier, excepting the degrees of comprehension and acuteness displayed in each. Parmenio said, "I would accept these proposals if I were Alexander." "So would I," replied Alexander, "if I were Parmenio." This is an instance of high or dignified wit, because regarding things important. The often-quoted passage of Hudibras,

" And, like a lobster boil'd, the morn  
From black to red began to turn,"

again, is an instance of low wit, being expressly intended to degrade. Yet the acute-



ness in the former idea does not show so much strength of mind as that comprehension which appears in the latter.

Wit, indeed, receives a value from the quality of the objects on which it is exercised. The most brilliant flashes of imagination are sometimes insufficient to compensate the disagreeable ideas which disgusting allusions create ; and often, while we admire the superstructures of wit, we lament the coarseness of the materials of which they are composed. For these imperfections, however, genius is not accountable, as it is merely by accidental association that mental exertions are united to those things which are disagreeable ; and the intrinsic qualities of the intellect, and those of the objects of its ingenuity, must remain for ever separated.

## CHAPTER III.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF ORDER IN MENTAL OPERATIONS.

ORDER is necessarily connected with *number*; and receives its value from the assistance which it gives to comprehension.

The mind is limited: one acquisition is, in some degree, always balanced by the loss of a former; and, although attainment is, on the whole, progressive, the intellect is capable of containing only a certain number of images. On that very intricate subject, arithmetic, it can pass through but a very few parts without noting its steps by figures. Only one idea can indeed be present at a time. The most extensive contemplation appears to be nothing more than a succession and transition of individual thoughts.



It has been remarked, that the art of thinking is to attempt but little at once. Order, by dividing extensive subjects into parts, suits them to the grasp of the mind, and leads it forward by gradual steps.

Without order, we should never reach an idea of the plan of nature. All would be a confused mass, appearing boundless, and defying equally the judgment and the memory.<sup>1</sup> Order discovers the relation which one object or event bears to another, puts all things in their proper places, and offers them to the mind, like the tools of a workman, without the trouble of a search.

Order is the essence of science, or it may be called science itself; for what would science be without order. In the military art, it constitutes strength. In business, it produces dispatch and ease; and where it is not demanded as a requisite, it is sought as an ornament. In order, consists one of the principles of beauty—regularity. The de-

<sup>1</sup> Many plans have been devised for the improvement of memory, but none are effectual except order.

light which we have in viewing the array of an army, or the uniform disposition of cultivated fields, arises from the utility of arrangement, and the relation which we perceive between the means and the end. Method is valued even in the most trifling sciences. In dancing and music, it is what chiefly pleases.

But, in literature, and those employments which more immediately represent the mind, the effects of order are most conspicuous. When extensive subjects are arranged in such a manner, that one cause naturally leads to another, and every succeeding idea is suggested by the immediately preceding, comprehension follows without effort, or by necessity. But if the labour of arrangement be left to the reader in any piece of composition, nothing is accomplished towards diminishing the natural difficulty of the subject, and every exertion of the mind remains to be made upon it.

*Connection* is, indeed, no less necessary than order. When transition is sudden or violent,

the chain of ideas is broken ; but when it is gradual and easy, our progress is imperceptible. But connection and order are inseparable. The rule of order is to place nearest, or in succession, those things which differ least, or are most connected.<sup>2</sup>

Order may be said to be the first of intellectual laws. In literature, order is beauty ; in science, demonstration. In it, are included every energy and excellence of the art of thinking. Those, therefore, who wish to excel in composition, oratory, or argument, should make it their chief study ; for, as all conception is only a knowledge of the relation which parts bear to each other, no subject can be understood until its parts be arranged.

<sup>2</sup> Order has several laws, or connection may be said to arise from various causes, viz. *time*, *causation*, and *importance*. But for precepts or reasoning, there is scarcely any absolute order ; as it is said, “ from any one truth, all truth may be inferred.”



## CHAPTER IV.

### THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE MIND, OR EDUCATION.

**E**DUCATION forms the greatest change which takes place on the mind ; and under that term may be comprehended every improvement arising from the contemplation of nature, as well as that derived from books or instructors.

Man has been called the creature of circumstances. The mind comes into the world naked and destitute of ideas. All ability depends upon knowledge ; every accomplishment is an attainment ; every talent, an acquirement.

Ability may, however, be said to be of two kinds ; natural,<sup>3</sup> as well as acquired. Both

3 “ —————What high capacious powers  
Lie folded up in man—————.”



are equally accidental ; the first arising from the original frame of the mind or body ; the second, from opportunity of improvement united with industry.

Learning is, by some, taken for a proof of capacity ; and it is certain that facility and extent of acquisition are proportionate to the natural aptitude of the mind.

The expansion of the intellect resembles the spreading of flame. Fire arises from a spark, and, by embracing matter, kindles into conflagration. The mind is called into exercise by receiving the impression of surrounding objects ; and, by extending experience, it raises itself to the height of wisdom.

Wisdom is slowly attained. We cannot be wise upon any subject without having thought long upon it. One remark produces and corrects another, till, by continued reflection, we are carried forward, from distinction to discovery, as far as it is possible to penetrate. The more we think and study, the more we increase knowledge and improve discernment ; as the mind, from the

desire of changing its ideas, cannot dwell long upon any subject without perceiving something new. To understand any science is but to know all the facts regarding it. When we continue to think on a particular subject, every difficulty which arises in the discussion requires a solution, every opposition makes a distinction, until our ideas are modelled into system. The mind must be long exercised in making experiments, balancing facts, and forming analogies, before it can establish an opinion; and remain long attentive to the fluctuation of events, before it can form settled ideas of the scheme of things.

Wisdom always presupposes experience; and is merely a collection of maxims which the mind has been able to draw from its observation of the operations of nature. Experience is the foundation of reasoning, and knowledge the first step towards excellence in every science. A poet, an orator, a critic, or a logician, should know every thing; or at least his art will depend on the extent of

his knowledge. To inform the mind must be preparatory to every occupation. Without an extensive range of information, no person can rise above mediocrity in any pursuit in which the intellect is engaged. It is variety of knowledge which actuates all the powers of the mind, which stimulates every talent, and draws forth all its perfections ;—by which the cases which illustrate, the analogies which elucidate, and the similes which ennoble, are furnished ;—by which eloquence is fed, reasoning supplied, and wisdom established.<sup>4</sup>

4 The following panegyric on the benevolent Howard, is a splendid specimen of the application of knowledge.—“ I cannot name this gentleman” (says Mr. Burke) “ without remarking that his labours and writings have done much to open the eyes and hearts of mankind. He has visited all Europe—not to survey the sumptuousness of palaces, or the stateliness of temples ; not to make accurate measurements of the remains of ancient grandeur, nor to form a scale of the curiosity of modern art ; not to collect medals, or collate manuscripts ; but to dive into the depth of dungeons ; to plunge into the infection of hospitals ; to survey the mansions of sorrow and pain ; to take the gauge and dimensions of misery, depression, and contempt ; to remember the forgotten ; to



All things in nature bear a relation to each other, either in quality or operation. As the particles of fire combine to produce heat and light, so do things in elucidating each other. Those who have a general acquaintance with the sciences can, in some degree, apply their knowledge to every thing. He who possesses an extensive range of information can never be taken by surprise. An enlarged mind views all nature, perceives, at a glance, whether every thing be in its proper place; and no phænomenon can present itself, or hypothesis arise, which it will not have the means to solve or examine.

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attend to the neglected; to visit the forsaken; and to compare and collate the distresses of all men in all countries. His plan is original; and it is as full of genius as it is of humanity. It is a voyage of discovery; a circumnavigation of charity. Already the benefit of his labour is felt more or less in every country. I hope he will anticipate his final reward by seeing all its effects fully realized in his own. He will receive, not by retail, but in gross, the reward of those who visit the prisoner; and he has so forestalled and monopolized this branch of charity, that there will be, I trust, little room to merit by such acts of benevolence hereafter."



Whatever widens analogy, increases the materials of both judgment and invention. The more extensive our combinations and comparisons are, the more accurate will be our determinations, and the more acute our remarks on any thing which becomes the object of our reflection ; the more successful every effort, and the more brilliant every production of the mind.

So nearly related is knowledge to ability, that it is, indeed, impossible to conceive any view of remote objects, to acquire any species of information, or to attain any idea of science, which does not tend to confirm or correct our opinions, to enable us to unite facts, enlarge theory, or to produce any variety of combination which novelty may demand. In short, as all the operations of the system of things arise from general and similar principles, each idea reflects a light upon another, and the whole analogy of nature combines to enrich every particular subject. Such are, indeed, the connection, the similarity, and the commixture of the

different parts of nature, that a person cannot acquire a knowledge of any one particular subject, without, at the same time, acquiring a certain degree of knowledge of another; and it seems impossible fully to understand any science without understanding every. A mathematician, a chemist, or a physician, if he be nothing more, can seldom excel, even in his own profession.

Without learning, the mind must necessarily be confined to the narrow circle of individual experience. There are, indeed, instances of great poets having appeared in very rude ages;<sup>5</sup> but it is apparent that excellence, independent of education, is confined to poetry alone, and even to that species of it which is merely descriptive or narrative. From that sort of merit which is required in poetry, it may be excellent, and yet of a confined nature; but, as all other sciences demand a degree of cultivated reason which depends on general analogy, it is

impossible to excel in them without some aid in addition to individual reflection. A person originally ignorant of every science may, indeed, by applying all the strength of his mind to it, make considerable progress in a particular subject ; and on that subject his education is to be considered as complete. But the want of general knowledge will still be evident in his productions ; it will be found that his mind is, in a great measure, sunk to poverty of ideas ; that all his attempts stand separated from the rest of nature ; that they are meagre, devoid of ornament and illustration.\*

The sciences naturally derive aid from each other, and the illustrative part of every subject is borrowed from another. Every peculiarity of science, every historical fact, every picture of polite letters, serves to stimulate the mind, and tends to vary its reflections ; to create a wise remark, or furnish a hint which may be expanded in our own compositions. Without variety of know-

\* The works of Burns may be here referred to.



ledge, therefore, every performance must be deficient in those allusions in which the beauty of literature consists.<sup>7</sup>

But although learning furnishes a great diversity of experience, and an extensive set of objects, incidents, and relations, calculated to exercise the intellect in every variety of mode, and try it in every shape; yet without that native energy, that keenness of remark, and retentive quality—called genius, it is impossible for the most extensive field of information to render the mind productive of original ideas. It becomes necessary, therefore, to observe, that all minds are not equally capable of acquisition, nor fitted for the same degree of improvement. Experience does indeed uniformly increase wisdom, but only in a degree relative to capacity. Different minds embrace nature in different degrees. The extent of attainment is various;—between one

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<sup>7</sup> “As if their labours, because gigantic, could contend with truth and heaven,” is a beautiful allusion in Junius.

rank of science or character and another—between Whiston and Newton, Blackmore and Pope.

The acquirements of the mind are, however, as much diversified by its means of information as by the original strength of its capacity. When we consider the numerous circumstances by which its expansion may be assisted or retarded, and the various species of experience which serve to compose the general substance of knowledge, nothing will appear more liable to incidental difference than mental characteristic. Education undoubtedly forms the chief of those casualties which affect the fortunes of literary men. Such is the importance of its influence on the human mind, that a very ordinary capacity, by receiving all the culture of which it is capable, may be exalted to a very high degree of respectability; while the greatest genius may, by being engaged in the lower occupations of life, be so degraded, as to remain undistinguished from the crowd of mankind.

The want of education must have precluded those who possessed the greatest talents from the temple of Fame. Divested of it, we may suppose Newton to have remained, perhaps, a sagacious hind; Milton, a rustic ballad-maker; and Shakespeare, a miserable scene-shifter.

Since, therefore, the circumstances which form the mind are so variable and so important, attention and acuteness will be necessary to distinguish whether want of acquisition indicates want of ability, or want of opportunity. The sciences furnish that sort of artificial experience, commonly called education, by which a knowledge of things may be attained without either the same ability or length of time that is necessary to derive it from nature. That classification of the objects of nature, which goes by the name of the sciences, is the work of thousands. By it, a person, in a short period, becomes master of the combined remarks and reflections of mankind for ages. General improvement is slow, and the pro-



gress of human-knowledge gradual ; but all the wisdom of the species is soon acquired by an individual. *So easy is it to learn, so difficult to discover or invent*, that a person who has received a scientific education, and a person self-educated, will seem entirely different beings.

Hence, in comparing the abilities of different individuals, it is necessary to be informed whether their knowledge has been collected immediately from nature, or received through the medium of the sciences. In the same manner, to form a just discrimination between the capacity of persons who have lived in ages remote from each other, we should previously ascertain the state of learning in the one age and in the other. For, without this precaution, the great and the mean may change circumstances, and the latter take the place of the former.

But, in the difficult task of marking the original differences of ability, some general rule may, perhaps, be discovered. We may

conclude that those persons are of a superior order of genius, who, besides the acquisitions of education, possess a fund of ideas, remarks, and opinions of their own. Those, again, may be held of inferior rank, whom vacancy of mind, and imbecility of intellect, have rendered capable of showing education alone—as a mirror reflects merely those objects which are presented to it, and as many opaque bodies shine with a borrowed lustre. While some rest their claims to fame upon their reasoning and reflection, others value themselves entirely upon their learning, and are content with the reputation of being able to comprehend what rules inculcate. A mind of a superior class will always indicate its rank by looking beyond its education; while a weak mind will betray itself by appearing to be absorbed and confined within the compass of that science which it has been accidentally led to study, by its deficiency of general ideas, and ignorance of the analogy of nature. The mathematician who derived no other pleasure from the perusal

of the *Æneid* than tracing the progress of *Æneas* on the map, and he who, after reading the tragedy of *Iphigenia*, asked what principle in morals or physics it illustrated, were as deficient in genius as in taste.

There is no person of any original strength of capacity who will not, under every disadvantage of circumstances, possess a scope of thought and set of principles, peculiar to himself, and relative to his ability ; and such, again, is the nature of the human mind, that every person who can distinguish between one and two, may, by minute division and simple arrangement, be taught the most difficult of sciences.

Acquisition cannot, therefore, infallibly mark genius ; nor ignorance, the want of it. The chief criterion of ability is not learning, but invention. There is a certain cast of originality which never fails to accompany great talents, as well before education as after it, and which distinguishes them both in ignorance and in knowledge.

A person of superior powers, who has been



fortunate in opportunity, seems always master of his learning; he never takes more of a science than is consistent with general views, but renders each science subservient to another, or puts all upon an equality; he knows where to begin and where to stop, and, in short, displays that strength of mind which grasps the whole, and is beyond the reach of bias. Of the commanding superiority of genius, Junius' letters are a striking instance. The author speaks only to what he knows; refuses to discuss what he does not understand; never defends what is indefensible; nor is betrayed to lose sight of his outline by attention to particulars.

Again, a person of equal talents, in the most degraded state of human society, never fails to discover the unaided progress of his mind by the extent of his principles of judging. It is the nature of superior powers to surpass their opportunities, to produce much reasoning on a small degree of information, and to draw general conclusions from a con-

finer experience.\* As we have a Newton in a cultivated age, so have we a Copernicus and a Galileo in a rude. But while mankind hailed the former as a benefactor, they were dazzled by the splendour of the two latter, and wished to extinguish that light which was too strong for intellects accustomed to the darkness of ignorance.

Some men are superior to circumstances, and possess a genius universal in scope as those causes which it delights to explore. To a powerful mind, little is sufficient to unfold the scheme of things. Whatever be its situation, it, in some measure, rises above

\* Sir Isaac Newton was one of those whose penetration anticipates direct proof. He made many predictions, by the natural strength of his mind, which have since been verified; while there are many persons who have drawn erroneous conclusions from the most distinct experiments. It is indeed obvious that experiment, notwithstanding all that has been said in its favour, can never supply the place of intellect; that it is only an instrument subordinate to sagacity, and useful as it is put into able hands. Hence it often happens that the conclusions of speculative men are more correct than those of practical.

the prejudices of the age, indicates its superiority by escaping the contagion of example, drawing its ideas immediately from nature, and attending only to those qualities which are of general interest; while common men imitate the follies, and copy the errors of each other, confine their attention and reflection to a narrow circle, and are governed by accidental habits, and local peculiarities.



## CHAPTER V.

MEMORY THE CONCOMITANT OF EDUCATION, OR  
EXPERIENCE; DEPENDANT ON JUDGMENT, OR  
STRENGTH OF MIND.

WITH regard to knowledge, Memory is to be viewed more as effect than cause; as naturally flowing from experience, and accompanying the expansion of the mind.

Whatever we remember is fixed in our minds by some interest less or more; and the stronger the impression, the more vivid is our recollection. Difficulty of attainment and retention never fail to accompany each other; and labour is always recompensed with remembrance.

The connection between ideas subsists by relations similar to those which exist externally; by contiguity of time and place; by resemblance and contrast, cause and effect.

In proportion as the mind is capable of conceiving things, it is interested by them. Judgment excites interest and fixes attention, by engaging the mind in discussion; and enlarges the circle of pleasure and pain, while it extends the scope of reflection.

A strong mind is capable of perceiving the most distant analogies, and of uniting the most remote objects in nature. An extensive comprehension and a great memory, therefore, for the most part, go together. Thus, a person who has, by long reflection and study, made himself acquainted with most sciences, or at least has a mind stored with general information, when an observation is made which engages his attention, or any event occurs which raises his astonishment, immediately retraces his experience in search of similar and related objects, and assembles every thing connected with it within the compass of his knowledge; so that his ideas are carried backward in a train by the relation which they bear to each other.

Without relation to induce interest, it is impossible to recollect any thing. Every idea of former transactions, every recollection of past remarks, and every renovation of knowledge, will appear, to those who have patience and acuteness, to be produced by some occurrence connected with that train of reflections which it brings back into the mind. Every acquisition of the understanding, again, remains dormant in the intellectual repositories, until some similar circumstance happen, or relative idea occur, to revive our recollection.

Although any new event, or remark arising from it, creates only one train of ideas, the objects of these ideas may contain other qualities than those which occasioned the first connection and recollection, which may lead to ideas different from the original. In this manner, the mind may, by foreign qualities and distant connections, be drawn to thoughts and recollections the most remote from the object which first engaged its attention.



Nothing material ever enters the mind. When past ideas are revived by others similar, the present operate only as a handle or thread of connection to lead back the mind to former; and every act of recollection is a new conception. The mind can, when interested, keep a number of objects within its view. But, as interests are weakened by time and the change of things, it is less inclined to look at remote objects, and turns itself to others which are more important by being nearer.

Memory is but an extension of the understanding, and the excellence of the former is always proportionate to that of the latter.

When the mind first appears, its expansion is but very small. Its experience cannot then have created interest sufficient to incline it to attend to things; or have improved its knowledge or its judgment so far as to enable it to perceive any remote connection, to carry backward or forward any considerable train of ideas, or to wander into distant reflections. But, as our judgment is

increased, our view of relation is enlarged, and the memory expanded.

One remark creates another, and fixes it in our recollection : one relation leads to the discovery of others, until the mind become so far extended as to spread itself over the face of nature ; as to be capable, at any time, of uniting the most distant objects, and of retracing, by turns, whatever it contains, to its utmost boundaries.

That combination of ideas which constitutes memory, resembles a grating composed of cross bars, in which each binds the other, and serves to complete the general connection and strength of the fabric. The excellence of every intellectual quality depends, in a great degree, upon that of another. As the measure of one faculty is increased, another is improved. Every thing is fixed in our recollection by the hold which it takes of the mind. A man of judgment, therefore, generally recollects every thing worth recollecting ; but persons of little discrimination and narrow reflection, allow numberless events



and objects to pass without observation. Hence, as the mind is filled by its knowledge, the memory must always be contracted in consistency with the understanding.

It is by the objects we perceive in looking backwards, and in retracing events, that we measure time ; as it is by those appearing in any space, we measure distance. When we are asleep, the longest period seems but an instant ; and, when we look upon the ocean, the greatest space appears but a span ; because we perceive no objects to create distinctions and suggest remarks to the mind.

It is the same with memory. If a person be of weak judgment, or incapable of remark, however many events may have occurred to his experience, if he has not been interested more by pleasure and pain than by the vigour of his mind, no trace of them will remain in his recollection.

Every person, it has been observed, complains of his memory, but no one of his understanding.<sup>9</sup> But, although it is not gene-



rally thought so, to complain of our memory is, in reality, to complain of our judgment. It is often said by persons of no very vigorous mental powers, after having read a book, that their labour has been useless, as they do not remember a single circumstance of its contents ; while those of stronger minds reply, that memory depends entirely upon the degree in which a person interests himself in the affairs of which he reads, and that they, after having read any book, find the subject, by the discussions in which it has engaged them, and the remarks which they have made upon it, so imprinted on their minds, that the smallest connected circumstance never fails to recal it to their recollection.

The memory of persons of narrow comprehension is in proportion to their judgment, and consistent with their pursuits and interests. The mind must be extended according to its magnitude, and every person has a range of reflection peculiar to his capacity.

Men of superior understandings, however, in some things, and on some subjects, have less memory than those of inferior ; because there are many things incapable of interesting the former, and which have importance only sufficient to engage the attention of the latter. Slight relations naturally make little impression on a strong mind ; and hence the remark that “ memory and judgment are seldom united.” Application is indeed, in some measure, arbitrary ; and it is difficult to determine how far the powers of the mind may be carried in any particular direction. We often hear of persons who can, from one hearing, recollect a sermon, or, from a single perusal, repeat a newspaper with all its cross readings ; but, like other prodigies, they are seldom seen. As far as experience goes, if any person possess memory without judgment, it is in things not worth recollecting.

We always remember best those things with which we are best acquainted, which have any connection with our pursuits or pleasures, or on which the mind is generally

employed. A philosopher, who reads history, will remark and remember the revolutions of human opinions, the progress of knowledge, and change of manners among mankind; a statesman, the art of kings, by which they gained ascendancy over each other, or kept their people in subjection; a military man will, perhaps, pay most attention to the exploits of heroes; and a beau, to the gallantries and fashions of different ages. Each will have his mind filled with the facts which engaged his attention, and stored with ideas resembling his own. But he who has the most enlarged comprehension, and who is capable of viewing the greatest variety of circumstances, will have the most extensive recollection.

There is, however, a species of memory which seems to baffle every attempt at explanation, and which must be classed with those unknown minutiae of principles, the operation of which is the subject of conjecture. As nature is uniform as far as the eye can penetrate, we must conclude that it is



the same beyond the reach of human organs. We know that most plants arise from seed ; but the earth is covered with a variety of minute vegetables, the origin of which can be discovered only from analogy.

The peculiarity in memory which occasions this difficulty in our theory, is that by which a boy remembers a long catalogue of names, or words, which he does not understand, and which, in some degree, resembles that facility of imitating tunes, called an ear for music. It must be concluded, from the necessity of a cause for every thing, that this talent is derived either from some minuteness of remark, or diminutive observations, by which the mind recognizes and detects those words which follow each other ; or that it is attained by custom, or the consolidation of experience into a habit like that by which many transactions of life are performed, in which there is a very small degree of mental exertion perceivable, but in which there must however be some. This species of recollection and retention of facts, objects, or

sounds, seems to be acquired by substituting labour and pain for other interest ; and, if it is accomplished by habit, which there is some reason to think is here the prevailing principle, it either has remark and the interest of judgment for its basis, or is much assisted by them.

Such memory, however, is of the least important kind. As it has but a slight connection with the understanding, it is of little service to it ; and that only which is gained by expansion of mind and improvement of judgment is useful and valuable.

## CHAPTER VI.

### CLASSIFICATION, THE GREAT INSTRUMENT OF JUDGMENT.

AFTER the mind has acquired distinct ideas, it is generally employed in classifying them. Classification is the last improvement of knowledge, and that operation which is the origin of all ability. Its utility arises from diminishing the number of objects ; and so far it differs from order, which merely puts every thing in its proper place. By mixing similar things, their variety may be encreased to a great extent ; but, by classification, many ideas are converted into few. The more, therefore, we can simplify and generalize things, the more easily can we comprehend them.

The first ideas which we acquire are too



imperfect for recollection ; but there can be little doubt that the mind originally views all objects as different and unconnected. By farther experience and exertion, modified always according to the original degree of capacity inherited from nature, we perceive many to possess common qualities, and unite multitudes under one appellation. In this manner, the mind proceeds from individual to species, from species to genus, and from genus to order. It is, however, to be remarked, that classification depends also upon an inverse progress, and as much upon the observation of difference as of similarity. Hence the subdivisions which it comprehends, and the origin of ranks, which perhaps are not perceived in the progress of generalization. All the divisions of classification originate, however, in extensive views. Without seeing the whole, it would be impossible to assign each inferior class to its proper place. Classification is, in reality, never perfect until the subdivisions be united into one system.

After the mind can view nature as connected by a few general qualities, or as divided into classes by distinctions, it forms to itself those extensive rules called *principles*. When our ideas have reached this point, whatever object be presented to the mind, it is at no loss to discover its rank, and to refer it to its proper place in the order of things. Hence experience becomes useful, and hence knowledge is rendered valuable.

Nothing, however, is more certain, than that experience may be possessed without wisdom, and learning without ability. Travellers are not always wise ; “ neither do the aged understand judgment.” A person may, in fact, pass through all the gradations of schools and seminaries with but a very slender acquisition of ideas, or with ideas devoid of selection and connection. How often do we see men load their memories with facts and circumstances, with dates and names, without inference or conclusion ! and how often do we find learning consist in the servile repetition of the opinions of another,



without the consciousness of understanding in the person who adopts them !

Mental improvement is not gained by experience, but by *thinking*. The improvement of the mind depends upon its activity ; is subsequent to experience and information ; and is accomplished merely by comparing ideas. Without previous thought, any attempt at reasoning is vain. When a person endeavours to discuss what he has not considered, he discovers many exceptions, conditions, and modifications, which he had overlooked, and lays himself open to a multitude of corrections and exposures. Even let his acquaintance with things be ever so general, the acquisitions of his understanding, if he has seen without reflecting, or read without digesting, cannot be great.

It is not in accumulating in disorder and confusion, but in assembling with discrimination ; in subdividing and combining ; in separating and uniting ; in multiplying distinctions, and extending connections ; in which the perfection of knowledge consists.



While some persons are entirely occupied by cases, others are led away by slight similitudes and accidental connections. The chief merit is certainly a knowledge of principles; but it is often no less difficult to discover that which is near, than that which is distant. Distinction cannot, in fact, be too much attended to. We often join things together, when there is little or no connection between them; but when we make a distinction, it is seldom false. In the circle of reflection, the mind, however, seldom fails to return to an individuality of thought similar to that with which it commenced. Every view which it takes is but with the intention of satisfying a single inquiry; every proposition requires but a single solution. To reduce a wide range of ideas to a small focus is the sole purpose of thinking.

All mental excellence is indeed founded on *experience*; of which there are two kinds; the first derived from the observation of *nature*, the second from *reading*. The latter is that which chiefly furnishes the materials of

wisdom ; but both become our own, merely by the transmutations of reflection. Besides knowledge and learning, an exertion of the understanding is necessary to compare ideas and contrast opinions ; to adjust experience, and modify the notions of others according to the standard of our own judgment. By contemplating that information which we receive from reading, new distinctions are traced, and associations formed, suitable to every occasion ; and, by revolving in our minds those ideas furnished by outward objects, like pebbles rolled in the ocean, they assume a shape and polish which they had not already attained. Almost every excellence and beauty which occasion draws forth previously exist in the mind. For even the readiest replies, the most unexpected flashes of wit, and the acutest remarks, are, for the most part, but recollections and applications of wisdom formerly acquired.

*Distinctness* is the greatest attainment of the mind, and the ultimate object of both remote research and minute investigation.



From it, is derived all readiness of combination, all strength of reasoning, and force of argument. As words always correspond with thoughts, it is also the origin of conciseness and energy of expression. Locke and Demosthenes are not more remarkable for the force of their language, than for the distinctness of their ideas.<sup>1</sup>

Simplicity of conception is an excellence from which all others flow. With clear ideas, it is easy to decide ; to group images, and form complications of qualities ; to compose pictures, and extend delineations.

To possess capacity is, in fact, only to understand things. As general ideas are acquired, talents are uniformly multiplied. After our view is far extended, if an object be presented to imagination, all others rise up which have the smallest connection with it. Hence wit and wisdom are generated ; hence the mind is rendered prompt and decisive, and prepared for every contingency.

<sup>1</sup> *Strong language* (as it is called), without strong ideas, is merely vulgarity.



The most general ideas are, however, the result of minute inspection. To understand any subject, we must study that subject. It is said that a knowledge of mathematics is a great help to reasoning; but a knowledge of mathematics can merely enable us to reason on mathematics. Knowledge of subject is derived only from an actual comparison of parts. By comparing one part of a subject with another, we understand that subject; and, by comparing one subject with another, we adjust the whole. The mind must rise from less to more, from the small to the great, from the particular to the general. Yet, after it has attained a knowledge of the few principles which govern nature, it returns to a more close examination of individual subjects, and forms to itself those little rules which may be distinguished by the name of *maxims*. Even in the most minute and trifling affairs, we are on the watch for conclusions to regulate future conduct.

Hence all ability is nothing more than a

knowledge of *general facts*, or *clear ideas of agreement or disagreement*; although the extent to which distinct ideas are carried is very different in different men.

## CHAPTER VII.

THE GREATNESS OF MINDS KNOWN BY THE EXTENT  
OF OBJECTS WHICH THEY CAN EMBRACE; OR BY  
THEIR CAPABILITY OF TRACING ONE CAUSE, OR  
ARRANGING ONE SET OF FACTS.

THE natural talents of the mind can be ascertained only by its attainments; but as intellectual energy must bear a relation to external objects, the distinct nature of their difference becomes an equally determinate criterion of the capability of the mind.

The perfect equality of all single ideas forms an infallible basis for judging of the force of the intellect, and reduces the theory of genius to a simple principle. It is not to be said that one idea is greater or more difficult of conception than another, but that one person has accumulated a greater or smaller number of ideas than another. Where there are ideas, there is genius, and all difference



of genius consists merely in difference of extent or range of ideas.<sup>2</sup>

Nothing can be more erroneous than to imagine that the difficulty of directing the operations of things increases in strict conformity with their magnitude or moral importance. There appears no greater policy nor stretch of mind necessary to the administration and economy of national than of domestic concerns, as it has been proved that, with only a change of terms, the same language, or combination of ideas, will apply to both.<sup>3</sup> We have also seen it, oftener than once, exemplified, that a kingdom may be conquered with a smaller portion of good conduct and perseverance than an ordinary fortune can be acquired; and that a great general may be outdone in sagacity, artifice,

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<sup>2</sup> The term *genius*, as used emphatically for *great genius*, is a very indefinite mode of expression. Every person, strictly speaking, is a man of genius, although there are different degrees of genius.

<sup>3</sup> For examples of this, see Campbell's *Lexiphanes*.

and stratagem, by a common pick-pocket.

Every thing is difficult merely as it is complex ; that mind only is greatest which can contain the greatest number of ideas, whose comprehension extends farthest, or whose grasp can embrace the most numerous and various set of objects.

As the mind overlooks the particular, and seizes the great and general, of nature, it possesses genius ; and as it is capable of multiplying its ideas of relation, and increasing its sphere of analogy, it possesses wisdom. For, as there can be no judging without comparison, that comparison is best which is farthest extended, that reasoning most convincing which unites the greatest variety of objects in one view, and that conclusion most to be depended on which rests on the widest basis. All our opinions are formed upon greater or smaller theories, or more or less extended views of facts. Correctness of decision is, therefore, uniformly proportionate to the scope of the mind.

To infer either the presence or absence of

great talents, from an individual exertion, is but to form a conjecture with regard to the intellectual powers. Judgment is never constituted, nor distinction ascertained, but by a chain of thoughts, and train of ideas. For, as the importance of one thing depends merely upon its relation to another, to comprehend any subject clearly, we must see beyond it, and have a view of its bearings with respect to other things.

The expanse of the mind can, therefore, be justly obtained, and its excellence or deficiency rendered distinctly apparent, only by *theory*. In endeavouring to grasp a connected system, the mind is extended and exerted to the limits of its ability; it measures its capacity by the difficulties of nature, and shows accurately its magnitude according to that standard. In tracing causes and arranging facts, it is, at once, employed and exerted in every variety of operation. Comprehension is best discovered by the plan, and acuteness by the execution of systematic performances.



The conception of connection and distinction is, in reality, but an act of the same talent inversely applied. As judgment is always produced by comparison, acuteness, whether it be displayed in the union or separation of qualities or objects, is equally the criterion of an enlarged mind. Every original idea, whether it appear in the discovery of truth, or the detection of error, every production independent of rules, and effort beyond education, displays strength of mind, as it shows extent of view. Novelty of ideas is always the indication of comprehensive, and the want of it, of contracted, capacity. Genius is uniformly discovered by chusing a path for itself, while common talents are known by following the beaten tract. Little minds find employment within a very narrow circle, and are easily governed by the authority of celebrated names, established doctrines, and prevailing maxims. But independence of opinion, originality of thinking, and freedom of remark, denote the mind which is not to be fettered by common rules,

and infallibly indicate a genius expanded beyond ordinary bounds.

Comprehension and acuteness produce and elucidate each other. Comprehension creates acuteness, and acuteness discovers comprehension. The expanded mind must always be wise, and the wise mind expanded. The vividness of a strong mind sometimes displays itself in concentrated penetration, and at other times in extended contemplation ; but as acuteness discovers genius only as it is relative to enlarged reflection, to judge of it by the former, instead of the latter, is to prefer the knowledge of a remote to that of a proximate cause.

Genius is, in every case, to be measured by comprehension, in whatever manner that comprehension may be displayed: But as what is just can only be good, and as what is true can only be wise, to produce novelty without excellence is merely to multiply error and vary absurdity.

Discovery has, indeed, always the appearance of paradox, because it proceeds from

a degree of reflection which is inconsistent with familiar ideas on account of its expanse.<sup>4</sup> But eccentricity and extravagance are not, therefore, to be considered the criterion of genius ; for, unless paradox enlighten as well as astonish, and impress conviction while it creates surprise, it must be considered as indicating unnatural combination more than magnitude of comprehension. The invention of a visionary hypothesis must rank far below the discovery and delineation of a real cause of nature, and serves merely to illustrate the weakness of the mind which gave birth to it ; to exhibit its defects, and degrade its perfections. If, therefore, in arrangement, the talents of men are most eminently distinguished and displayed, their deficiency is not less conspicuous. Innumerable theories have been given to the world, which have done honour to the species ; while others have been produced, by the folly and caprice of men, of such whimsical construction as might have led us to

<sup>4</sup> See Note 5. Chap. XV.



imagine that they were intended to reflect disgrace upon human nature, and to render mankind ridiculous. Yet, to invent any system, which displays consistency and includes analogy, however false, discovers a comprehension of mind superior to that which is incapable of conceiving any connected chain of ideas, although inferior to that which constructs an extensive theory according to the laws of nature and the principles of reason. The complicated vortices of Descartes evince no small degree of ingenuity ; but still they must rank far below the simple gravitation of Newton.

Those, however, who so unfortunately chuse their pursuits, exhibit to disadvantage, talents, which, had they been employed according to their extent, would have appeared greater than they really were. For we often imagine, that those who produce perfection in one pursuit will produce perfection in another, and that those who shine in narration will shine in theory.<sup>5</sup> But a person

<sup>5</sup> Voltaire is a respectable historian, but a very superficial philosopher.

may be able to do every little thing well, and yet be incapable of performing any thing great. Nothing is, indeed, more erroneous, than to imagine that those who can distinguish between a few objects, or arrange words, can distinguish between many objects, or arrange extensive and intricate combinations of things. Talents, which are equal to one operation, may be totally inadequate to a greater. When a person who is qualified to reason only on a confined scale, enters on an extensive subject, he generally falls into a thousand extravagancies and absurdities. A mind of slender capacity, when it attempts to pursue any cause or train of facts, is soon, by partial and imperfect connections, diverted from the direct line or true course of thinking, so that its conclusions very often bear neither reference nor similarity to its proposed intentions. There can, perhaps, be no better criterion of narrowness of capacity, than that irregular and wandering manner of thinking, which shows that the mind guilty of it receives



every impression of nature as it stands, can contain only one idea, and that in it the succeeding blots out all recollection of the preceding.

Every mind which is narrow must be irregular. There are persons who have no idea of general principles, and who are incapable of comprehending them. To these, every fact seems distinct, separate, and unconnected ; the creation appears devoid of plan, and all nature a maze of confusion. A weak mind takes its ideas from nature as it finds it ; and is always ready to represent it in every monstrous and fantastic form which accidental combination produces. When the mind possesses the power of comprehending only a limited portion of things, it is incapable of distinguishing the variations from the principles of nature ; to it, every fact appears a pinciple ; and every principle, a fact ; every opinion which it forms is but a conjecture, and every decision which it makes is a conclusion at a venture.

Without an enlarged degree of compre-



hension, it is impossible to have clear ideas. To distinguish accidental connection from real, and comprehend the order of nature in every derangement of irregularity, can only be within the power of that mind which conceives its whole scheme. It is a knowledge of the anatomy of nature which alone produces distinctness of conception, and facility of determination, and enables us to solve intricacy and unravel perplexity. But how few are capable of abstract thinking, and what narrow boundaries confine the reflection of the generality of mankind ! Even the greater number of those whom we consider persons of good sense, when they attempt to carry their ideas beyond a certain circle, are lost and bewildered in a maze of confusion. Perhaps, therefore, the extent of every mind is marked by nothing more regularly, than by the capability of tracing the causes of nature to their source.

As all subjects can be treated in a profound or superficial manner, the power of exploring the chain of events which holds

the phænomena of nature together, appears, among mankind, in every degree of individual variety. Some minds are able to proceed so far, and unable to make any farther progress in a subject; while others trace it to the limits of nature, and the boundaries of human knowledge. Some minds float upon the surface of things, while others penetrate as far as the nature of the senses will permit; some extend but to the more immediate causes of things, while others stretch to the most remote; some know things only in the shape of separate events, while others join facts together and form them into extensive systems.

There are two species of reasoners, and two ways of reasoning; one from causes, and another from effects, or abstract and familiar. The phrase, to think deeply or shallowly, signifies merely to know more or less of any subject. Hence, abstract reasoning is an infallible sign of superior capacity, and the want of it a strong indication of inferior powers; because the mind is stimulated only

by labour, and, for the most part, stretches itself to the extent of its ability.<sup>6</sup>

The force of education and habit may, indeed, create exception from this rule, or, in some degree, soften its rigour, although such exception must be made with caution, and a sparing hand. Excellence of mind may be discovered even in the familiar and sentimental manner of reasoning. But such is the improbability of abilities, when the means of improving and displaying them have been afforded, being greater than they appear to be, that very few persons seem entitled to the benefit of this exception.

<sup>6</sup> It is to be observed of the majority of those who profess to give formal dissertations, that, although they set out with a few general ideas, they soon fall into what is called the common refuge of the wretched—a case in point. In whatever way they begin, they are almost sure to end in suppositions or facts. Perhaps something of this may be said to arise from the nature of things. Most subjects furnish only a few general ideas, but all, a great many particular. The mode of particularizing, therefore, affords proof against a person's abilities only when he does not give all the general ideas of his subject, or endeavours to impose upon us the particular for the general.



Even those who have the best claim to it, although they may be allowed to possess talents considerably superior to what is generally the portion of mankind, still cannot be ranked in the first class of genius.<sup>7</sup>

Nothing can be more fallacious than conclusions drawn from partial delineation. Unless a person has been engaged in arrangement of one kind or another, it is impossible to judge correctly of his ability. Execution can never be considered the criterion either of great excellence or deficiency of mental powers; and theory is necessary to discover the narrowness as well as the expansion of the mind.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Addison may, perhaps, be placed in the inferior class.

<sup>8</sup> Thus, however great the abilities of the author of Junius' Letters may be, or however distinctly proved, we can never, owing to their being but partially exerted, see their limits or real extent. All we know is, that he possessed great abilities, but how great we can never discover. By the mode of writing letters, besides the additional advantage of speaking in the first person, the author is confined to no topic, he is at liberty to introduce any subject, and his subject is concluded whenever he chuses; while a person who writes a formal disserta-

We often admire genius for the same reason that we wonder at *terra incognita*; and imagine that it is great, because it has not been proved to be small; because its boundaries are not defined by rules, nor its powers reduced to any science.\* But execution is certainly more capable of discovering inferiority than superiority of capacity. Those who excel in that middle species of style which displays neither extensive views, nor remote deductions; but merely the beauty of partial delineation, smooth narration, natural and obvious sentiment, or vivid decla-

tion is compelled to adhere to his subject; he has his subject and nothing more, and is obliged to give all the ideas of it. We readily perceive where the latter is at a loss for matter; where he omits, and where he wanders. But the former can never be wrong; because his subject is long or short, as he chuses; and, when he finds difficulty, he can always escape by changing it. It is, therefore, much more easy to ascertain the abilities of Locke or Hume, than of the author of Junius' Letters.

9 Nothing can be more delusive than the common cry of what a great genius he would have been, had he received a better education.



mation, must be considered as filling only the inferior class of genius:

There are, indeed, celebrated authors, whose works exhibit nothing more than particular observations, and partial delineations, without any dependance on each other. Those performances, however, the execution of which is excellent, and the parts valuable, as far as partial beauty is to be estimated, but which present no whole, and teach no science, nor add any thing to the simplification of nature, we are, by strict justice, compelled to degrade to the lower rank of genius. When such works become popular, it can be accounted for only by the faculties of the bulk of mankind being better adapted to the comprehension of the small than the great, of the particular than the general, of the perfection of parts, than the connection of the whole.<sup>1</sup>

## G

<sup>1</sup> I know not whether the parts of the works of Longinus and Burke, on the "sublime," be sufficiently connected by one general cause, to deserve the appellation of theories.



Unless the members of any performance be comprehended in a regular scheme, it is impossible it can be great. The parts of any subject, or the particular facts arising from any general cause, have as evident a dependence upon each other as the limbs of a statue ; and the perfection of the former, as well as of the latter, arises solely from their union, harmony, and proportion. It is not the complexion, but the features ; not the finish and polish, but the form and make ; not delicacy of colouring, but boldness of design, which is greatness in literature. The sublimity of any work, proceeding from the order of the whole, and the excellence of its parts, resembles the magnificence of the solar rays diverging from a common centre ; while the greatest beauties, in confusion, are merely similar to the elements of nature in original chaos.

— The beauty or accuracy of any performance may be very agreeable or useful, but it is the disposition of its *outlines* only which

can render it *great*.<sup>2</sup> For, as the perfection of all mental talent depends upon the capability of conceiving the relation which things bear to each other, every work of literature, or effort of the mind, displays capacity merely as it discovers comprehension, or serves to enlarge reflection. General views only can indicate ability. Whether novelty appear in the shape of philosophy or fancy, it is not *minute beauties*, but magnitude, as a whole, by which its rank is to be ascertained. A figurative passage, a simile, or a witty remark, displays nothing which does not lie within a narrow compass, and of which every person is not capable. But he who, in any manner, discovers the possession of that strength of intellect, which has enabled him to conceive the various combinations, relations, and analogies of nature,

## G 2

<sup>2</sup> What Pope says of beauty, may be said of greatness:—

“ In wit, as nature, what affects our hearts  
Is not th’ *exactness* of peculiar parts ;

’Tis not a lip, nor eye, we beauty call,  
But the joint force and full result of all.”



proves, at the same time, that the principles of all sciences exist in his mind, and talents which can be varied to every mode of human employment; for, surely, whatever comprehends the sum of knowledge, includes its parts.

To a superior mind, all the magnificence of nature is present, and all its scheme unfolded; all its qualities appear in array, and all its operations display themselves, before it. The vast and the minute are equally open to its view; and it is ever ready to astonish by comprehension, or surprise with acuteness. It combines the most distant relations, and dissevers things apparently most connected. Those related qualities, which adventitious circumstances have separated, can, by no disguise, or remoteness of situation, be concealed from it; and those of a heterogeneous nature, accidentally associated, can, by no closeness of union, escape the vigour of its observation. It traces relations, and multiplies distinctions, in every variety of form; it restores the order of



nature, and reconceives the plan of things. In that strength of mind which may be contracted to penetration, or expanded to comprehension, whose concentrated heat burns at a point, or whose dilated light illuminates a vast expanse of nature, is displayed all that is admirable in the human capacity.

That native force of mind, which appears only by effect, is in itself inconceivable; but every variety of intellectual energy may be comprehended under the term reason. Reason is the power of knowing what *is*;<sup>3</sup> and to remark the difference or connection between one object or quality and another, may, perhaps, form a general characteristic of mental efforts. The laws of the intellect are very simple, but, at the same time, the difference between one mind and another is very apparent. To distinguish between two

### G 3

<sup>3</sup> Superiority of judgment seems to arise from that power of contemplation by which we fix our minds exclusively on an object, or its relations, until we receive their exact impression. But all ability may be said to consist in the knowledge of fact.

objects appears to be a portion of that mental operation by which the greatest systems are constructed ; and the most extensive arrangement of facts seems but a chain of discriminations.

That intenseness of thought, by which a person of a strong mind dissects and analyzes any particular subject instantaneously, may not appear great ; although it is but a different application of that power of intellect which extends its view far and wide.

Every mind is acute only because it is comprehensive. The most penetrating thoughts, and unexpected combinations, arise merely from general views, and extensive reflection. It is said, that fortune favours the brave ; and it has been remarked, that “ lucky hits seldom happen but to men of genius.” It is astonishing, when we hear the remarks of a mind greater than our own, to think how near they lay to us, and it seems wonderful how they escaped us ! It is remarkable how very different ideas are presented by the same event or object to two persons of dif-



ferent degrees of ability ! how many combinations occur in the reflections of men of talents, which are unknown to those whose capacity is destitute of creative vigour ! But every flash of wit, every brilliant thought, and shining idea, originate merely in latitude of conception, or expanse of mind.<sup>4</sup>

Every intellectual effort may be summed up in the term comprehension. Wherever the acquisitions of the mind commence, here they terminate. Towards comprehension, all human conceptions tend ; and from it, every noble effort returns. That *vivida vis*, that power of penetrating into things, of detecting their agreement or disagreement, is never exercised without adding to our ideas ; and the same strength of mind which enables a person to conceive his ideas, enables him to recal them.<sup>5</sup> Every additional

G 4

<sup>4</sup> Wit does not, however, require first-rate talents ; at least, that species of it which may be denominated smart sayings, does not consist in uniting very remote objects.

<sup>5</sup> See Memory, Chap. V.



attainment adds to the capability of acquiring another ; so that continual advancement in knowledge must be the natural progress of a mind impelled by the energy of great talents. But such, again, is the extent of nature, that no force of genius can exhaust its variety : Its amplitude must always defy the acquisitions of the greatest mind. The originality of nature does, indeed, often seem exhausted to the eye of common observation, until a superior genius arise to unfold its treasures, and extend the sphere of human reason ; when we perceive that what we had taken for the boundary of things was merely the limits of our own reflection.

The mind of man may, indeed, exhaust the novelty of the general and distinguishing features of nature ;<sup>6</sup> but to explore all its

<sup>6</sup> The natural progress of the mind is rapid at first, and slow at last. It is limited as much by nature as by capacity. Our talents are originally advanced by the novelty, and ultimately checked by the poverty, of things. The prominent features of any subject obtrude themselves upon us ; while more delicate peculiarities are distinguished with difficulty. Hence, an early display of ability is often followed by a total

qualities, and trace all their relations, has hitherto defied the efforts of human genius. The principles of nature are few and uniform; but they appear in a multitude of events, and diversity of individual objects, which furnish distinctions sufficient to engage the most exalted talents:

The objects and qualities of nature are thrown together without any connection or order, and mingled in the most confused variety. Hence, steadiness of mind is necessary to prevent our being dazzled by their diversity, and force of judgment to remove their confusion and join them together according to their natural dependance.

That mind is greatest which can view the connection of things to the greatest extent, and which can separate them in the most minute manner. A strong mind is that which keeps a firm hold of the present idea, and

want of improvement. Pope never excelled his "Essay on Criticism," written at the age of twenty; and Akenside never equalled his "Pleasures of Imagination," written at twenty-three.

which can pass from one quality to another by the slightest similitude ; but which can, at the same time, preserve one principle by itself, and reject whatever is unconnected with it. It requires great vigour of thought to see things as they are. An intellect which can grasp but a single idea, loses one before it reaches another, and must determine according to the last which it retains. Excellence of mind, therefore, consists merely in being able *to compare many ideas* ; to comprehend their mutual dependance, and to distinguish between them.



## CHAPTER VIII.

THE MIND EXCELS IN ALL THINGS, ACCORDING TO  
ITS STRENGTH.

**I**F one idea be conceived with the same ease as another, it is not to be supposed that the powers of the mind are affected by every change in the mode of their application.

As all intellectual operations are similar, he who is wise upon one subject, if he have the same degree of experience or information, must be equally wise upon another; and he who excels in one science, must excel in every.

The mind is the same in all circumstances. But, as the sun is sometimes obscured by clouds and vapours, its splendour is liable to be extinguished by casualties. Situation, education, and opportunity, may exalt the

talents of some, and depress those of others ; diversifying the human character, and varying the excellence of the performances of mankind, in every degree.

When, indeed, the mind of any person is once formed by an education which involves nature in its view, and takes for its basis those universal principles which are to be found in every place, society, and age, if the various species of information be mixed in such degrees of temperament as to induce the preponderance of no particular science, habit, or inclination, then that person will be equally fitted for all professions, pursuits, and occasions: Whatever be his situation, he will always make distinctions and remarks, and discover the same degree of penetration, and strength of understanding. A man of enlarged ideas can never be misplaced. Place Dr. Johnson in London, or the Hebrides, and he will still be surrounded with the radiance of philosophy, and his mind will still emit the rays of wisdom.

But a person of great powers, if originally



situated in a rude and barbarous society, although he may hold the same superiority over those around him, and preserve the same difference from an inferior, as if he had been born in a more favourable situation, will, in acquirements, be much below one of the same natural capacity who has had better opportunities of improvement. The strongest mind must bend to those customs and prejudices which are obtruded upon it every moment by authority and necessity, and which are continually in its view, even although a person be placed among them at an advanced period of life. But if he be exposed to their influence from his infancy, he must unavoidably draw all his principles of thought and reasoning from them, because he can have none else to judge by. If, however, he determine justly, according to his knowledge, as the merit of thinking does not consist in the knowledge of facts, but in the inferences which are drawn from them, the opinion of wise men can never be prejudiced against his un-



derstanding. In estimating capacity, we must, therefore, if it be practicable, make allowance for the defects of education, although it is very difficult to distinguish the original inequality of minds whose circumstances have been different.

In the difference of circumstances, *inclination* forms a very important part. As the performances of the mind have a strict correspondence with exertion, it often happens that a person fails in one pursuit, and succeeds in another, not less difficult, but of a different nature; the reason of which, supposing opportunity to be equally favourable in both, can only be, that his habits have been such as to produce a taste for the one, and a dislike to the other. Hence, what is called peculiarity of talent, distinguished from education and the degrees of ability, is merely peculiarity of taste or inclination; and hence the wonderful phænomenon of persons who have appeared entirely deficient in capacity for one science, but who have shone in another of greater intricacy, is not

to be solved by peculiarity of talent, but merely by peculiarity of disposition.<sup>7</sup>

With regard to success, there are only two things to be distinguished; the *means*, and the *power*. In the first, may be included all adventitious causes, such as opportunity, education, and exertion; in the second, the natural difference of minds, or that degree of energy which is supposed to exist prior to the influence of external circumstances.

The only original difference, or the only ultimate difference of subjects, setting aside all casual peculiarities, is the comparative intricacy of parts which they contain, or the repeated discriminations which they require. A person who succeeds in one pur-

<sup>7</sup> Of the error here alluded to, the following instance is from the Spectator.—“The story of Clavius is well known. He was entered in a college of Jesuits; and, after he had been tried at several parts of learning, was upon the point of being dismissed as a hopeless blockhead, till one of the fathers took it into his head to make an essay of his parts in geometry, which, it seems, hit his genius so luckily, that he afterwards became one of the greatest mathematicians of the age.”



suit, will succeed in another, if it contain only the same number of parts, and if external circumstances be favourable. But if any pursuit, or subject, be of so extensive a nature, or contain so great a number of parts, as to exceed the limits of his comprehension, no advantage of circumstances can produce success. When, therefore, accidental peculiarities are excluded or balanced, the difference of minds must still be marked by the difference of subjects.

Although all ideas are equal, some subjects furnish a greater variety and complication of ideas than others. Thus, the “*Essay on the Human Understanding*” contains a prodigious number of parts; independently of this, that each part is so abstract and general as to represent a multitude of other parts. But still it must be considered as inferior to the “*Elements of Euclid*,” which, if they were the labour of one man, would be a stupendous effort of genius. On this point, it is, however, to be remarked, that the mathematical sciences, though confessed on all



hands to contain a greater number of parts than the moral, seem to be more easily acquired and generally understood. In the former, our progress is marked by distinct and determinate steps, in which no error can escape detection. In the latter, deviation is easy ; virtue and vice, good and evil, are separated merely by shades of distinction, or differ only in degree, and are, on that account, more readily confounded. Besides, in the former, we judge of external objects, which may, if necessary, be presented to the senses ; in the latter, of our own ideas, which are always of a light and evanescent nature, and easily escape detection. Hence morality is not only the most noble and sublime, but also the most difficult, of sciences. Some persons can, by no mode of instruction, be brought to conceive, in any other than a mechanical form,<sup>s</sup> even the existence of their

## II

<sup>s</sup> Many persons never think of the mind as governed by sensation, pleasure and pain ; but talk of it as a piece of mechanism, composed of wheels, pullies, and levers. In illustra-

own ideas ; but every person may be taught something of the science of quantity and number.

The same degree of ability, therefore, which is suitable to one subject, may not be equal to another. Some persons can, without embarrassment, view an immense variety of objects, and pass, with intuitive rapidity, to a conclusion, through a long train of ideas ; while others are confused by the smallest variety, and cannot, by any effort, reach a distinct determination. A mind which is able to decide on a simple proposition, may not be able to decide on a complex, or to reduce an extensive and intricate combination of qualities to a *definition*.

Attainment is not, indeed, a necessary

tion, take the following method of teaching mathematics, as practised in the academy of Ladago.—“ The proposition and demonstrations must be fairly written on a wafer, with ink composed of a cephalic tincture. This the student swallows, upon a fasting stomach ; and, for the three following days, eats nothing but bread and water. As the wafer digests, the tincture mounts to his brain, bearing the proposition along with it.”



consequence of application. All that the efforts of the mind can amount to, is only to make use of the abilities which it possesses, to acquire knowledge, and improve its habits of judging. The mind can only call its powers into action, and give attention to things. It cannot create abilities or faculties in itself. It can encrease neither the acuteness of its remarks, nor the natural extent of its comprehension. However completely, therefore, inclination may, in a cultivated society, set aside all other circumstances with regard to mental employment, or however necessary it may be to exertion, the success of the mind must still depend upon, and be measured by, capacity, as much as by application. Inclination produces only attention and exertion; but, as the general error, in the selection of our pursuits, is to chuse, not below, but above our powers, inclination can never be considered an infallible criterion of the extent or aptitude of the powers of the mind.

When we wish to discover that situation



in life for which a young man is best adapted, instead of watching with a romantic and superstitious care, to perceive to what trifle he will give his attention, we should endeavour to ascertain the force of his mind, in order to proportion his pursuits to his abilities. By disposition, we can understand what a person is willing to pursue; and whatever may be the extent of his talents, there must be many things, in the world, suitable to them. But success depends as much upon capacity as upon inclination. A person may desire, and attempt, things to which he is unequal, and in which he can never succeed. We often know and value that which would exalt our reputation, without being able to perform it, and perceive perfections in others which, we are confident, will never be produced in ourselves. Who does not know that an Aristotle, a Cæsar, or a Demosthenes, would be highly respected? As passion, therefore, may, in inferior things, overcome prudence, we should endeavour to distinguish desire from capa-

city, and vanity from ability. May not also the disposition of a boy be temporary, accidental, fanciful, or arise from local circumstances? But, when once the strength of the mind is ascertained, there can be no mistake in applying it to its object. It then only remains to chuse, among those things to which it is equal, that to which its passions dispose it to give application.

Therefore, although every person may succeed in all things, it is only according to capacity; and if any person grasp at those which are more extensive than his powers, it is evident that he can embrace them only to a certain degree. There is no mind which is not capable, by its own efforts, of making a certain progress in every subject, but that progress may not be great. As, therefore, nature may be divided into parts, and one species of things separated from another, there are peculiar pursuits, which, by furnishing comparatively few ideas, form a more exact correspondence than others with the abilities of particular persons. He who



cannot invent may imitate : a person incapable of design may be qualified to execute ; and one who is unequal to command may still be fitted to obey.<sup>9</sup>

One individual may possess more ability than another ; but that there are certain subjects requiring a peculiar species of mind, and persons who have been born with that species of mental talent which is adapted to them alone, are merely fictions of imagination. A person may have been born with a peculiar disposition, and he may have preferred one profession to another ; but, if it had been his choice, he would have acquired as great eminence in any other, as in that which he made the object of his attention, if difficulty had been equal in both. Supposing, however, a person to attempt subjects unequal in difficulty ; supposing he who had narrated a few simple facts, or written an elegy or a sonnet, should attempt history or epic poetry, his success in the former

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Beattie had talents for a poet, but apparently not for a philosopher.



would be no evidence that he would succeed in the latter. As the capacity can never be expanded beyond its natural bounds, a person may be able to carry his attainment to the limits of one pursuit, while his ideas extend only a certain length in another.

That all minds advance, in the acquirement of knowledge, only in proportion to their ability and facility of comprehension, cannot be denied; and it is not less apparent, that, when a mind of no great vigour attempts what is above its power, or a subject of a complex and involved nature, it can make progress only equal to the extent of a subject to which its abilities are adequate. But there can be nothing more absurd than to imagine, that one quality of the mind of any person is different from that of the mind of another, in any other respect than in degree of excellence; that there are different or unequal qualities in the same person's mind; or that he can think better on one subject, or occasion, than on another.

Difference of subjects and circumstances may create difference of success, but cannot affect the native energy of the mind. A person may, from pain of body, or anxiety of mind, be more unable to exert himself at one time than at another; or his attention may, sometimes, be called off from the subject on which he is employed, by something more agreeable and interesting; but, at all times, his success, if he can command the same ardour, will be the same.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE MIND GOVERNED BY THE PASSIONS, AND DIRECTED BY ACCIDENT.

A PERSON may succeed in one pursuit to the same extent as in another; but the pursuit in which he actually exerts himself, or the subject on which he bestows his labour, depends upon his *taste*, or that peculiar passion which determines his choice.

Passion applies to intellectual operations no farther than regards the *direction* of our abilities. But from that attention which we are induced, by disposition, to give to one object in preference to another, arise *habit*, every peculiar production of literature, and all difference of mental talent<sup>1</sup> which is to be distinguished from the *degrees of ability*.

<sup>1</sup> See Habit, Chap. XIX.



Nothing is more various than the inclinations and pursuits of men. Some are prodigal, others avaricious ; some are ambitious, others luxurious ; some court danger and fatigue, others seek comfort and ease. In the intellectual character, varieties are not less numerous. While one man delights in reasoning, another revels in imagination ; while some labour to instruct, others attempt to amuse. Some are always serious ; and the perpetual endeavour of others is to be humourous. It is not, however, to be thought that every person is confined to a particular walk from which he cannot deviate ; only that he is guided by a prevailing inclination which produces characteristic. As this inclination determines his efforts to a particular object, so far they are successful.

Yet taste is not to be confounded with the natural powers of the mind. Although there are many species of disposition, there is but one species of intellect. If, indeed, inclination be taken for the criterion of genius, it must entirely exclude ability. Magnitude

of genius must then be determined by the force of the passions, not by the strength of the mind. As, however, things have, intellectually, no other difference than difficulty, genius has no other peculiarity than extent. Every other variety which it exhibits, arises merely from its circumstances, and the disposition or taste with which it is attended. The mind appears originally without ideas, and destitute of bias. It is diverted from the straight line of motion merely by secondary impulses. Disposition and inclination grow up with experience; and men become philosophers, poets, historians, and generals, as it were, by accident.

Some peculiarities of passion are acquired by education, or arise from accidental circumstances. The first book a person reads, the first picture he sees, unexpected success, necessity, or the influence of example, may determine the ruling passion. At other times, it is fixed by constitution. If Pope had not been confined to study by the weakness of his body, it is probable his genius might



have been dissipated in the pursuits of pleasure ; and many a shining beau, if he had wanted animal spirits, might have produced a grave didactic author.

All our efforts, whether in the pursuit of fame, wealth, or pleasure, arise from our passions. Hence passion produces ability. But ability, again, by opening new views, together with the prospect of success, produces passion. It is, therefore, difficult to discover which is the cause and which the effect.

As taste or inclination divides mankind into different classes, so, by a species of subdivision, it separates one character of the same class from another, and forms what is called *manner*. It is this which distinguishes Hume from Robertson, although both are eminent historians ; and renders Pope and Dryden different, although great poets using nearly the same subjects.

In the inferior requisites of literature, manner is chiefly apparent. The whole merit of the minor part of composition, includ-



ing every peculiarity of style and ornament, as well as *propriety of narration*, indubitably, depends less upon natural capacity than upon those characteristics which arise from external circumstances. In style, the greatest and the smallest minds are distinguished only by that disposition which has arisen from minute causes, and been acquired by imperceptible degrees. But, as nature cannot be counteracted, nor inclination bended to every purpose, perfections of style become as valuable as those produced by original superiority of intellect.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> To particularize how passion operates in style, it may be remarked, that one person cannot resist the temptation of a wise observation, or an additional remark, in violation of elegance, and the harmony of intimate connection; while another readily sacrifices the matter to the manner, and can reject ideas to produce flowing language. But style may be separated into two grand divisions. One which preserves a rigid order, admits nothing superfluous, no digression, nor artificial mode of introduction; another more rambling, which does not prohibit frequent digression, which permits irregular methods of introduction, and will abate precision for a sounding word or harmonious period. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. The former possesses most dignity, and correctness; the latter, most variety, and ease.

## CHAPTER X.

LABOUR NECESSARY TO ATTAIN EXCELLENCE; AND  
MERIT, TO ACQUIRE FAME.

**T**HE first division of mental ability, is the natural capacity of the mind; the second, its acquirements.

As a necessary requisite to excellence, the mind must, in the first place, be powerful; for no improvement or alteration which is made on minds can obliterate that original difference which nature has marked out. And neither can superiority of intellect be accounted for, nor can comprehension and acuteness be communicated to the mind by any mode of education. Sense cannot be taught. Rules and maxims, in the hands of the weak, lead only to misapplication, and render folly conspicuous.



But ability, however great naturally, without application, is vain. The strong derive no advantage from their strength, if they do not employ it ; and the swiftest runner would never reach the end of the course, if he did not exert his powers.

In all the inferior stations of life, industry is more valuable than capacity. Even in the most dignified employments of the mind, it is a necessary concomitant of success. For the relation between effort and attainment is mutual, and great actions cannot be accomplished without great exertions.

At first view, indeed, it appears, that no great assistance is given, by labour, to the proper and characteristic performances of genius ; but that the outlines, the great and general, are what genius, by the extent of its comprehension, suddenly conceives, without much effort. On closer examination, however, it will be found, that the most instantaneous originality of conception is the result of a distinct progress of knowledge, and that the most hidden analogies are con-



ceived by a long train of ideas. Extensive combination and remote association, without doubt, serve always more to display genius than industry. But the detailed part of theory is to be modified merely by the continued application of thought on the particular part of the subject ; and the circumstantial matter which is necessary to complete any design, can be supplied only by minute observation.

Men of ability are often induced, by a mistaken self-sufficiency, and reliance on great powers, to despise industry. But no superiority of talent can supersede the necessity of extensive information, deliberate reasoning, and ample detail. The most dignified designs, and noblest plans of genius, may be lost for want of care in the execution ; while partial perfection, the produce of inferior capacity, is preserved by the care which has been bestowed upon it.

Unless the most extensive and correct outlines be amplified by particular matter, and melted into each other by imperceptible de-

grees, they can never, however much they may be admired by men of genius, be valued either by them, or the bulk of mankind. For, although the plan of every intellectual production is what alone renders it great; yet, in the circumstantial, the minute, and the laborious part, consists whatever is useful or interesting. Such is, indeed, the importance of finish in mental operations, that a few ideas, the arrangement of which is not embarrassed by their multitude, nor their connection impeded by the remoteness of their deduction, will be preferred to the greatest assemblage of good thoughts which want that polish which necessarily arises from superficial and obvious reflection.<sup>3</sup>

## I

<sup>3</sup> It may be here remarked, that a dissertation might be exhibited by a drawing, each paragraph under the form of a cone placed horizontally, the basis of which represented a general, and the apex a more particular, idea. Now, if these cones do not follow each other in exact line, but the basis of each succeeding be overlapped by the termination of the preceding, we would, supposing us to add an additional idea to the conclusion of any one paragraph, render it too particular



By some, the manner is preferred to the matter. This is certainly erroneous. But utility is so far connected with ornament, that no production of the mind can be perfect in matter which is not complete in elegance. Every imperfection or deficiency, every improper introduction or omission of ideas, must prove as injurious to matter as to style; and every appropriate embellishment, every judicious choice of words and order of expression, every beauty of harmonious periods, of simile, figure, and apt illustration, must tend as much to the elucidation, as to the decoration, of the subject.

No observation is more common than that it is easy to plan, but difficult to execute. This can, however, hold true only of such plans as want both novelty and excellence; to admit of its being united to the next general idea, and this, even the device of a new sentence could not prevent. In the best economised subject, therefore, it is often necessary, for the sake of elegance, to omit something. But, to prevent both the omission and crowding of ideas, the best plan is to write several dissertations on the same subject; and, for this purpose, the form of letters is not a bad one.



for, surely, a common artificer may build that edifice which requires the greatest architect to design. Many systems are, indeed, copies; many fables, imitations. When such are valued, the execution must rise superior to the scheme. Almost every particular idea is a whole composed of several parts. A single ornament may, therefore, display more ingenuity, and give a wider view of analogy, than the structure of an epic poem.\*

All is, in fact, plan; the difference being only between great and small plans. Few persons, indeed, are capable of strong general views. Even to compose metaphors, to chuse similes, or select instances, may not be a talent which every person possesses, but it is apparently one which every person may acquire. Command of language, again, depends upon an arrangement of ideas, or words, on every particular subject. This can be accomplished only by actual experi-

\* This is the *sublime* of Longinus.

ence and minute inspection. The difficulty here is not one great effort, but a succession of similar performances.

Number, which corresponds with mental exertion, consists in mutual dependance. To collect individual ideas, without consistency, displays little of the characteristic of intellectual energy,—the perception of agreement or disagreement; and is truly called labour. The lowest of design may be mean, but the most excellent of execution can never reach the highest praise; for, when we examine the greatest productions, each part seems easy of performance; difficulty appears only in the combination.

The most extensive things are, however, composed of minute parts. As all intellectual operations are design, so are they all labour. Sometimes enlarged views are attained by a few steps, and the mind returns to a more exact examination of particular objects. But, in general, the greatest abilities are formed by the same progress of individual acquisition as the smallest. Even



invention itself has been said to depend upon patience. Perhaps, therefore, the only difference between mental superiority and inferiority, is, that the former is capable of absorbing and retaining a more extensive portion of knowledge, and a greater fund of ideas, than the latter. Perhaps it is not so much the power of acquisition, without effort, as the extent to which attainment may, by industry, be carried, which distinguishes genius from imbecility. The difference between the lower and the higher rank of intellect appears to be, that the former can produce nothing great by labour, and the latter, nothing great without it.

It is altogether impossible to separate that degree of capacity which is natural, from that which is acquired. The doctrine that the measure of ability is varied only by the degrees of exertion, and that great talents are nothing more than the appropriation of application, may be unsound. But there is no such stupendous difference between the construction of the mental powers of one



individual, and of those of another, as that genius can supply the want of exertion, or that industry will not, in every case, be rewarded by a certain portion of success and attainment.

Great part of what has so often been ascribed to ability certainly belongs to exertion. We generally see the performances of mankind, without knowing the labour which has been bestowed upon them. Hence, by comparing the productions of those who have spent their lives in the pursuit of some great excellence, with those of persons whose exertions have been but moderately stimulated, we may form very erroneous estimates of their original abilities. The perfection of art very much resembles nature. Whatever is well done seems to have been done with ease. But the most eminent are, generally, the most laborious; and it is not to be doubted, that all those whom we are now accustomed, justly, to admire, attained excellence by the gradual progress of persevering industry.

The intense application which mathematics, and the higher branches of science, require, is incredible. The conclusions which Archimedes and Sir Isaac Newton reached, were accomplished by the most minute steps, and tedious processes. In literature, we find a similar exertion necessary. The most beautiful performances are said to be produced with the most painful throes. Milton himself says, “ by labour and intense study, which I take to be my portion in this life, joined with a strong propensity of nature, I may leave something so written to after ages, as they should not willingly let die.” Demosthenes’ orations are said to have smelt of the lamp, and the author of Junius’ letters confesses his labour. But, in the productions of no author, is labour so visible as in those of Pope. The incessant care with which he collected and treasured up ideas, his repeated corrections, and numerous additions, put the vigilance of study in a strong light. Yet, perhaps, his works discover more forced introductions, and misplaced ideas ; or, in



short, more of those sinkings, and that bathos, which he so much ridiculed in others, than are to be found in most writers.

Painters and statuaries are, in general, joined with authors; and, although their labours seem more of a mechanical than intellectual nature, yet they do not fail to concur in illustrating the importance of application.

In military enterprises, the stretch of mind and foresight necessary to the plan, are not more apparent than the promptitude and vigilance requisite in the execution; yet, in no pursuit, is less of labour and intellect capable of dazzling mankind. In the most difficult situation in which a commander can be placed, there are not so many things to be compared as in a common moral Essay; the difference only is, that, in the former, a wrong step is attended with the most important consequences to the interests of mankind. Of all heroes, Frederick of Prussia is he whose renown is built on the best known and most rational basis; but,



still, it seems entirely the effect of industry ; of that activity of mind which attends to small things as well as to great ; for, in the writings with which he has favoured the world, we see none but the most ordinary ideas.

Of difficulty, there appear three kinds ; first, that which is opposed to physical force ; secondly, that which belongs to suffering, where resolution is of most importance ; and lastly, that which consists in intricacy, where ability comes in place of courage. In the first and last, application is equally necessary ; but as far as intellect is regarded, literature must always retain a pre-eminence. The fatigue, exercise, and anxiety of mind, which an author has to encounter, also appear greater than those which attend military stations ; because it is the mind always which suffers, and the mind is much more engaged in the one case than in the other.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> There is this difference between the labour of the body and of the mind, that, while the former produces health, the latter produces disease.

Every thing valuable seems, indeed, to be obtained with labour and pain. No one must, therefore, expect eminence, without fulfilling the condition which attends it. The surest method of acquiring distinction, in any profession, is by deserving it. In literary pursuits, it is certainly, by no other means, to be attained ; for that reputation which owes its origin to casual incidents and present passions, must perish with the circumstances which give it birth.

Whatever is formed to endure long, is of slow growth. Those who rise suddenly to eminence, generally sink as soon into oblivion. Fame, which is destined to immortality, is, for the most part, the effect of diligence, and matured by degrees. A person may, indeed, be so connected with great events, as to reach a lasting celebrity, without any uncommon talent or exertion. But, in literature, merit only can avail. For, as no other means of influence can, by an author, be conveyed to posterity, than the beauties which his work contains, they must

be free from any other partiality than that which is universally felt towards what is useful or agreeable. Those, therefore, who wish to gain the approbation of succeeding generations, must endeavour to fix themselves in their interests; which can be accomplished by ability, only with the assistance of application.



## CHAPTER XI.

### THE MIND EXCELS ONLY BY THE APPROPRIATION OF ITS POWERS.

**T**HE extent and variety of nature are so immense, that the labour of the greatest mind, when diffused over it, amounts to little. The improvement, success, and performances of the mind, must, therefore, in a great measure, depend upon its exertions being concentrated.

An inferior mind, if it has been directed solely to one object, will excel a greater which has not been directed to that object, and which can form ideas of it only from general analogy ; and the inferior will, on that subject, be capable of instructing the superior. Pope is said to have received much assistance from inferiors, in enabling

him to understand the language of the Iliad, and to have got the entire system of his "Essay on Man" from Bolingbroke; who, though a person of no mean genius, was still inferior to Pope.

Universal excellence is sufficiently prohibited by the necessity of labour to acquisition. On every subject, we must think, reason, and decide, in order to acquire knowledge, form opinion, and attain judgment. However free an agent the mind may naturally be, or however transcendent the abilities of any particular person, there exists no power of excellence different from clearness of apprehension and facility of decision. The credulity of mankind can alone have created that supernatural and miraculous genius, which does not depend upon the ordinary relation of cause and effect, and which dissolves the connection between effort and excellence. An individual beauty may, indeed, be the result of thoughtless impetuosity, joined with a particular occasion. But a continued stream of excellence can be the



produce only of that assiduity, by which perfections are formed and accumulated, and by which art is made to resemble nature. Montesquieu is reported to have left behind him several volumes of notes, from which he extracted his "Spirit of Laws," and Butler is said to have made a collection of thoughts before he wrote his "Hudibras." Even simplicity is seldom the offspring of ignorance. Nature is, in every case, best imitated by skill and refinement.

It is, in reality, as absurd to think that a person could be wise on any subject without experience, as to imagine that he could have ideas without objects, or that he could reason upon the things of this world before he came into it.

As nothing of importance is performed by the mind without great perseverance and exertion, the belief of the existence of such a being as a universal genius, capable, without application, of excellence of thought on any subject, must be classed with those indulgences in imagination which have pro-



duced the philosopher's stone which turns every thing into gold.

Great natural powers, before they are applied to any particular subject, are, indeed, universal. But they are universal only in the choice of the subject on which they are to be exerted; and, if variously employed, "resemble expanded metals which lose in strength what they acquire in extension." Thus, Swift is said to be rather a wandering comet, than a fixed star; and if it had not been for his "Gulliver's Travels," a work equally suited to the old and the young, and as full of satire as it is of novelty, perhaps he never would have been considered a man of great genius.

Excellence has a correspondence with the industry of those who possess ability, but great excellence only with the appropriation of that industry. To be eminent in any pursuit, commonly requires all the exertion of our talents in that department in which we propose to become conspicuous; and, if a

person excel in any profession, it will generally be found that he excels in it alone. Few are eminent; and those few confine their superiority within a narrow circle, and shine within a limited sphere. Every person finds it necessary to chuse a certain profession, or restricted mode of exerting his abilities, and to condemn himself to voluntary ignorance in many sciences, that he may excel in one.

Those who are remarkable for talent or attainment in one respect, are generally as much deficient in another. Men of business are, for the most part, ignorant of science, and men of science incapable of business. That extreme simplicity in the ordinary affairs of life, which so frequently accompanies the highest powers, shows the difficulty of transferring the mind from one extreme to another. While it has so often rendered men of the greatest capacity objects of ridicule and entertainment to their inferiors, it is a circumstance to prove that the most exalted



genius is by no means boundless, and that industry forms an ingredient in the greatest character.

Every variety of intellectual ability may, indeed, be said to depend upon the capability of intense thought ; although this is, perhaps, only to vary terms without solving any difficulty. The question still comes to be, whether force of mind is derived from application, or application from mental energy ? A very moderate degree of attention seems, however, sufficient to strain the intellectual powers. From the limited nature of the human mind, we must always proceed in the acquisition of knowledge, by the gradual progress of multiplying discriminations, and making one distinction succeed another. To determine between two qualities is generally sufficient to employ the whole force of our intellects, and by repeating their exercise upon the same subject, all its parts, at last, undergo the inspection of the mind. But, *as it is impossible to do two things at once, we*



cannot direct our attention to one study without neglecting another.

The productions of the mind will, therefore, always be great, in proportion as the circle of its employment is contracted ; as it reduces an extensive range of experience to a small point, and confines great exertions to a particular object.

Capacity, conjoined with industry, insures excellence ; but in what occupation, or upon what subject, depends entirely upon the choice which a person may make ; for, if he dedicate his attention to mathematics instead of poetry, it is evident that mathematics will receive from him that consideration which otherwise would have been bestowed upon poetry, and that he will succeed in the one pursuit to a greater degree than in the other, according to the preference with which he has distributed his labour.

The value of any acquisition, indeed, refers to the purpose to which it is to be applied, Locke says “the mind should always

be free, and at liberty to turn itself to the variety of objects that occur." This is, without question, the most *useful* condition of ideas. A certain proficiency is also to be made, by those who possess natural capacity, in all subjects, and a considerable degree of ability may, undoubtedly, be accompanied with the power of varying its application. But facility of transferring the mind from one object to another, and of adapting it to the change of circumstances, is incompatible with every superior attainment; for it has been remarked, that general information is for the most part superficial, and that those who aim at universal talent are seldom distinguished for any thing great.

Most persons are capable of a certain degree of skill in every science, but never reach perfection, because they rest satisfied with their first attempts, or turn their attention another way. From labour, united with enthusiasm for a particular pursuit, perhaps, are derived all those distinctions by which *great men* are produced. It may, no doubt,



be said, that enthusiasm is to be considered rather as an indication than the cause of genius ; that the consciousness of superior powers is accompanied with a craving for action, and an irresistible impulse to great undertakings. But the number of those who, in every age and country, have shown themselves equal to those things which most dazzle mankind, bring all men nearly to a level. Many are undoubtedly distinguished by those accidents which beget enthusiasm and afford opportunity of action ; while, again, many remain in oblivion, because their minds have never been excited.

Some men push their acquirements farther than others ; but great genius is always confined to a particular object. The extent of acquisition may not find a limit, but the range is never without one. Science, it is said, is long ; life short.

“ One science only will one genius fit ;  
So vast is art, so narrow human wit.”

Cæsar is distinguished as a general ; Aristotle, as a philosopher ; Homer, as a poet ;



but neither Cæsar, nor Aristotle, nor Homer, is distinguished as general, philosopher, and poet. The king of Prussia endeavoured to perform the parts of all three, but succeeded only in the department of one. To those employments which may be called useful, the same reasoning applies. Some excel in one science, some in a particular branch; and reputation is always great according as the object of attention is minute. The world has, in fact, no confidence in any one who attempts to unite two different characters, who is at once lawyer and physician, metaphysician and poet.<sup>6</sup> In the mechanical arts, again, it is well known, that skill depends upon what is called "the division of labour," and that the farther this division is carried, the greater dexterity is acquired.

The restriction of our powers is, in reality, the great secret of all excellence, and the same importance of appropriation holds in

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<sup>6</sup> Neither Goldsmith nor Akenside were successful as physicians.

one pursuit as in another. Although nothing is more capable of exciting admiration than an exalted degree of genius, nothing is so limited and circumscribed in its action. As the mind is known and distinguished only by its productions, if its efforts be divided and weakened, it loses the appellation of great, and is deprived of the characteristic of superiority. Hence it is that men receive the credit of the assistance derived from the subjects on which they have been employed; and hence it is that, in defining genius, it has been thought necessary to include appropriation of labour.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> "True genius," says Johnson, "is a mind of large general powers accidentally determined to some particular direction."



## CHAPTER XII.

THE TREATING OF SIMPLE SUBJECTS NOT LESS PECULIAR TO INFERIOR MINDS, THAN THAT OF EXTENSIVE TO SUPERIOR.

ON nothing, however, does the appropriation of mental efforts, and the success of intellectual labour depend so much, as the due proportion of subject to capacity, which is as inconsistent with too small as with too great a degree of difficulty.

As there are some subjects above the capacity of some minds, so there are others which have not difficulty sufficient to attract the attention of other minds.

A person always exerts himself as he is interested, studies as he is engaged, and applauds himself according to the difficulties



which he surmounts. When the universal reluctance to labour is overcome, we commonly fix upon that which demands our greatest efforts. That subject which fills the mind is, in general, no less capable of stimulating industry than of drawing forth vigour.

There is a certain enthusiasm, or rapture, which every person feels when his mind is on the stretch. This is the parent of success. But, as it is peculiar neither to the highest nor the lowest capacity, it is a proof merely of exertion, and nothing more than the effect of a comparison of our own efforts with our own powers.

That which excites the exertion of one person, may have very little influence upon another. Every pursuit requires talents, if not of a particular kind, at least of a certain size. Extensive subjects are best adapted to great, and simple to more slender powers.

It is, indeed, difficult, sometimes, to discover whether indifference to a particular object indicates superiority or inferiority of

capacity, as both extremes tend equally to produce disgust. But this is certain, that the mind performs always best that which its abilities are best proportioned to, when they are neither too great to deprive of interest, nor too small to disqualify for execution.

Want of interest has almost the same consequences with regard to the mind, as want of ability ; both equally incapacitating. Men are seldom more capable of doing justice to those subjects which are inferior, than to those which are superior, to them ; and it is almost as difficult to a strong mind to bring its attention to an unimportant subject, as it is to a weak to be interested in that which it cannot comprehend.

Before a person can succeed in any undertaking, he must feel a pleasure in it ; for, when taste is wanting for any thing, it will be but badly performed. Hence it often happens, that those who possess the greatest abilities appear the most deficient, by being engaged in circumstances which want the



power of attracting them, and oppressed by duties which they feel no enjoyment in discharging.

Want of taste for any employment sometimes depends upon the habits of the mind, and sometimes upon its abilities; sometimes the habits of the mind give a cast to its abilities; and sometimes its abilities occasion the peculiarities of its habits.<sup>8</sup> But it is as improbable that any person will succeed in that for which he has no taste, as that he will excel without application.

Attention, taste, and application, depend always upon importance; and importance upon a medium between difficulty and facility. Some things are uninteresting, because superior to our abilities; others, because inferior. While the mind is rendered unsuitable to one pursuit, by being capable of a higher; it becomes adapted to another, only

<sup>8</sup> Talent may be said to fix, whether the class to which an individual belongs be high or low; taste, the species of that class. But much depends upon excellence in the class chosen; and taste and talent are often so mixed, that it is difficult to distinguish the one from the other.



by being inadequate to a greater. Hence character is diversified by the gradations of ability, no less than by peculiarity of application, and varies according to the rank which individuals hold in the scale of genius. Hence some persons excel in comprehension, and others in individual accuracy; some in plan, and others in execution; some in constructing systems, and others in narrating facts, or describing circumstances.

The ability of those who excel in general views is, indubitably, as far superior to that of those whose merit is confined nicety, as great is superior to small. But the excellence of the latter, in their own department, cannot be rivalled by the former; for, when a person's talents are not more extensive than that on which he is employed requires, he is interested in a degree as much greater than others, as his mind is less comprehensive.

A man of superior understanding resembles one placed on an eminence, whose attention to particular objects diminishes as

his prospect increases. The mind, when it is chiefly employed upon the great, neglects the minute; and, as no comprehension can be equal to the conception of all the connections and dependencies of any subject, while it is occupied by ideas which are profound, those which are obvious escape.

The remote and the familiar can never be united in the same person in perfection. For, as the vigour of a mind, accustomed to extensive view, and to the contemplation of distant connection, must continually compel it to return to that manner of thinking which is peculiar and habitual, remote would overwhelm and confound all attempts to introduce familiar ideas. Reasoning and declamation are, in a great measure, inconsistent. To prefer a weaker to a stronger reason, or to furnish that which is inferior to what the mind can afford, is a species of self-denial which every person finds difficult to perform.

Those who excel in the higher species of literature, are seldom possessed of much art



in the inferior ; those who are accustomed to demonstration and strong reasoning, are seldom capable of the flights of fancy ; and those who possess the power of tracing the intricate mazes, and distinguishing between the operations of human passions, have seldom much skill in painting them in their original obscurity.

But if a superior mind employ itself on trifling subjects, it will be capable of exalting them, and, if sentiment is intended, be in danger of changing it into reasoning.<sup>9</sup> Poetry has always been considered as the art of engaging and moving the passions ; but there is an English poet, who, impelled by natural strength of mind and native force of genius, has sometimes been didactic while, perhaps, he meant to be descriptive ; and who has produced reasoning when he probably intended sentiment.

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Johnson's " Rasselas" is no more a novel than any of his " Ramblers." " Candid," a performance on the same subject, displays a much greater diversity of character, and variety of incident, although the production of an inferior mind.



## CHAPTER XIII.

SOME MEN HAVE TOO MUCH GENIUS FOR SOME  
SUBJECTS.

THAT some persons have too much genius for some subjects, and lose as much reputation by the superiority, as others do by the inferiority, of their capacity, are facts which experiment has proved.

Some performances require less talent than others. Poetry has little connection with the judgment, but should be addressed chiefly to the passions, as the sole purpose of it is to amuse. The excellence of poetry is to engage, or display, the passions; which can be accomplished only by diffuse description, not by appeals to the understanding in the form of abstract reasoning. Where reason is concerned, consequences and general

conclusions are of most importance ; where passion, facts and circumstances. Hence the merit and difficulty of philosophy is the plan ; but of poetry, the execution.

In poetry, the manner is of primary importance, the matter but of secondary consideration. A subject which is trite and exhausted may, by the happy talent of doing things agreeably, be rendered so fascinating as to regain every charm of novelty.<sup>1</sup> In

<sup>1</sup> Our pleasure in reading the following passage does not surely arise from the ideas which it furnishes, but from the art which appears in it.—

“ Lo ! all in silence, all in order stand,  
And mighty Folios first, a lordly band ;  
Then Quartos their well order'd ranks maintain,  
And light Octavos fill a spacious plain ;  
See yonder, rang'd in more frequented rows,  
An humbler band of Duodecimos ;  
While undistinguish'd trifles swell the scene,  
The last new Play, and fritter'd Magazine.”

Nor in this more beautiful passage :—

“ And now, unveil'd, the toilet stands display'd,  
Each silver vase in mystic order laid.  
First, rob'd in white, the nymph intent adores,  
With head uncover'd, the cosmetic powers ;  
A heav'nly image in the glass appears,

works of amusement, it is not, perhaps, so necessary that our thoughts should be excellent, numerous, or penetrating, as that they should be highly ornamented, and polished in expression. The object is to select only what is agreeable. However destitute such performances may be of general ideas, or however little calculated to expand the mind; yet, if every thing they contain be pleasant, they must be considered perfect. Poetry may be deficient in whatever renders philosophy valuable, and yet be excellent. While irregularity is condemned in the lat-

To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;  
 Th' inferior priestess, at her altar's side,  
 Trembling, begins the sacred rites of pride.  
 Unnumber'd treasures ope at once, and here  
 The various offerings of the world appear;  
 From each she nicely culls, with curious toil,  
 And decks the goddess with the glittering spoil.  
 This casket India's glowing gems unlocks,  
 And all Arabia breathes from yonder box;  
 The tortoise here and elephant unite,  
 Transform'd to combs, the speckl'd and the white.  
 Here files of pins extend their shining rows,  
 Puffs, powders, patches, bibles, billet doux."



ter, it is, if not considered a beauty in the former, at least an imperfection, which, when accompanied with those qualities which affect the feelings, we are easily induced to pardon. Provided the characters and incidents of poetical fiction be natural and interesting, we are little solicitous about the propriety of their introduction; provided a poem be filled with beautiful passages, we are ready to forgive every deficiency of plan, irregularity and disorder. In poetry, all reflections are well timed, if well expressed; no character is improper which is interesting, no scene misplaced which is natural; every mode of style is permitted; the gay and the grave, the serious and the humorous, may be mixed together, without impropriety; and exclamation, interrogation, and every variety of expression, naturally introduce each other. In short, every picture in poetry is proper, if well drawn. As beauty is the soul of poetical composition, the presence of that quality is sufficient to compensate the absence of every other.

But, to philosophy, the reverse is applicable. While the laxity of fancy admits all ideas, the severity of philosophy rejects many. While the former shows but a few qualities, the latter must neglect none. Fancy may be complete without fullness, and perfect with superfluity ; but philosophy allows neither repetition nor omission.<sup>2</sup> Extensive system, a regular subordination of parts, and a rigid correctness of arrangement only can render works intended to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge, to simplify and generalize nature, perfect ; for, with whatever care and accuracy particulars are delineated, unless they be formed into a regular system, showing their mutual de-

<sup>2</sup> The labour necessary to purify, and render complete, any work, is generally invisible. But the difference between one which pleases, notwithstanding omissions, repetitions, and contradictions, and another which contains neither more nor less than propriety demands, is immense. Of Shakespeare, Hume says,—“ And there may even remain a suspicion that we over-rate; if possible, the greatness of his genius, in the same manner as bodies often appear more gigantic on account of their being disproportioned and mis-shapen.”



pendance, little is accomplished towards diminishing the variety of nature, or assisting the determinations of the mind. Nothing can, therefore, be more distinct than the excellence of works of amusement, and of those of science; the first being of a particular, and the second of a general nature; and nothing more evident than by which the greater portion of genius is displayed.

To those, however, who possess superior powers of mind, the small is more difficult than the great, and execution than plan; because inferior excellencies do not require genius, but industry; and industry is always proportioned to interest.

That degree of capacity which enables a person to abridge the difficulty of thinking, tends to alienate his affections from individual objects, and to produce a disgust at the meaner employment of execution.

A person may understand the philosophy of literary labour, without possessing the power of delineation in such a degree as those who do not. He may be able to de-



cide between the merits of works of fancy, and to point out in what respect they have failed in touching the passions, the reason of that failure, and that arrangement of events or objects which would have been attended with success; but, although capable of greater things, utterly unable, in representing the passions, to equal those who know nothing but the passions, who do not see beyond them, and who write entirely by instinct. It is probable that Locke, the author of one of the sublimest systems ever conceived by man, would not have excelled in the pathos of tragedy, the delicate sentiment and descriptive scenery of poetry, or in the circumstantial beauties of fable; yet authors who excel in all these may be found, whose comprehension does not extend from one end of their own performances to another.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Of the power of moving the passions, by the accurate painting of particulars without any distinct idea of generals, there is, perhaps, to be found no better instance than Sterne. Part of his irregularity is, no doubt, affected; but his illustration of the connection between wit and judgment by the two knobs

It is impossible that those who possess superior powers can produce in themselves that enthusiasm for inferior subjects, which is the first step towards success in every literary employment.

That is best and most naturally performed by the mind to which it is most closely united by both its abilities and habits. In works of amusement, those, whose ideas arise from passion and feeling, will have a greater chance to succeed, than those who endeavour to write sentiment with the apathy of reflection. Philosophy is as inconsistent with poetry, as abstraction is with passion.

Pleasure is greatest when free from all restraint, care, and difficulty. Those works, again, are most consonant to the laws of

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on the back of a chair (and which he evidently thought very clever), is sufficient to show that he could go far for what was to be found near at hand.

No author seems better adapted to sentiment, and less fitted for philosophy, than Helvetius. His trifling philosophy (as Hume called it) has absolutely no consistency.

pleasure which take it, and it alone, for their guide. The sublimest poets are seldom produced in the most refined ages, because the habits of reason then take place of the flights of fancy. They generally appear in the middle state, when the human mind is emerging from ignorance to knowledge. Of this, Milton and Shakespeare are striking instances. Had the latter lived in the present day, much of his originality, and especially that happiness of expression in which he excels all poets, had been polished away by his learning; although it is apparent, that, without some degree of mental culture, he could have had no excellence whatever.

As a continued exercise of strength of body destroys activity, acute thought deadens sentimental operations, and represses imagination. Correct thinking naturally leads to simplification and abstraction; destroys the beauty of superficial reflection;<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> And of *false ideas*; of which the following is a specimen.

“Ye too, ye winds! that now begin to blow  
With boist’rous sweep, I raise my voice to you.



and reduces the mind to a poverty of particular ideas. It is to be remarked that the Spectator, even confining ourselves to Addison's papers, contains more variety of character than the Rambler. How completely, likewise, might all Fielding's fine observations on human nature be superseded by a knowledge of the single principle of self love, which explains morality without the necessity of penetration or sagacity !

The higher rank of talent is alike incom-

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Where are your stores, ye powerful Beings ! Say  
Where your aërial magazines reserv'd,  
To swell the brooding terrors of the storm ?  
In what far distant region of the sky,  
Hush'd in deep silence, sleep ye when 'tis calm ?"

It is not meant to be contended that this personification is an instance of ignorance, but of art. Many similar passages are, however, to be found in both poetry and prose, the beauty of which arises entirely from the ideas being short-sighted, and which any performance aspiring to instruct can never admit, even as an ornament. Nothing of this kind appears in the poetry of Pope, notwithstanding the licence of poetry. The same cannot, however, be said of Addison's prose.

patible with *humour, fancy, and description*. A person who is accustomed to oppose qualities to each other, and to condense his thoughts, has, in general, little familiarity with cases, and cannot easily submit to follow the tedious progress of a work of entertainment. He feels it difficult to employ his mind in arranging facts, in distinguishing the preference between particular events and circumstances, or pursuing the passions to discover effects of which he is demonstratively certain. No person has his attention so much at command as to render that important which is indifferent. To become pleasing by the minutiae of story-telling, is an excellence which many, because they despise it, can never attain, and which can never have charms sufficient to engage their minds, or to attract the vigour of their thoughts.

The invisible art of writing in that simple and natural manner which interests the feelings, and fixes the attention,—commonly called genius, is certainly a rare and singular



quality ; but we praise it chiefly because we love it, and it is rather a happy than a great talent. It must not, indeed, be considered a correct definition of genius,<sup>5</sup> or, at least, if we are not to be governed by terms, of magnitude of intellect, to say that it is the power of doing that which no other person can do.<sup>6</sup> Ability, no doubt, consists in the

5 Nothing can be more vague than the term *genius*, as it is commonly used. Sometimes it is applied to *great talents*, whether in philosophy or poetry ; at other times it is used to signify merely *inclination* to a particular pursuit, without any extraordinary degree of ability ; but most commonly, it is appropriated to *imagination*. This misapplication of the term arises, evidently, from confusion of ideas, and it would be vain to attempt to confine to any precise meaning, a word so indefinitely used. Instead, therefore, of definition, it is the object of this Treatise to arrange the operations of the mind, together with those external circumstances by which they are affected, without regard to the abuse of words. As all qualities of the mind are here considered the same, excepting in degree, it may be sufficient to say that the term *genius* is used, in general, to signify, indiscriminately, every species of intellectual talent, and that great powers of mind are designated by comprehension alone, without regard to subject.

6 This is often a *manner*, arising from peculiarity of habit, conjoined with a certain degree of mental expansion. Man-



power of performing any thing, whether great or small, and, if a person want any portion of that power, he wants so much ability. But superiority of capacity is often an obstacle to those graces which are the chief charm of works of amusement. For, if the attention of the mind be not confined within a certain circle, it loses sight of all those minor ideas and particular objects, in which, whatever is beautiful, eloquent, and pleasing, in composition, consists. However wonderful the circumstance, it will, therefore, be found, with little exception, that a great poet is but an ordinary genius.

There is, undoubtedly, a certain mediocrity of understanding necessary to excel in the circumstances of fable, or the minutiae of sentiment, which a mind disposed to consider only the sum of facts, and the amount of particulars, must feel itself to want, as well as the necessary experience. Circumstances will never be well painted by those  
 ner is, indeed, important; but we cannot call it any thing other than it is.

who have accustomed themselves to view things in the abstract. Descriptive and fanciful productions are best finished, and most easily executed, by inferior minds.<sup>7</sup> Dr. Johnson had evidently too much genius for a tragic writer; and, if we separate things nicely from each other, and adhere to correct definitions, Pope will, perhaps, appear to have had too much for a poet. The poetry of Pope is too abstract, too far removed from objects and the passions, and too logically close and didactic, to be pleasing. It must, therefore, be classed with

7 Story-telling is a good criterion of ability. A man of sense is induced, by capacity, as well as inclination, to give only the sum and substance of facts. A person of ordinary capacity, again, follows no other line of narration than events, encumbered with every casual association present to him; his facetiousness and absurdity are both equally accidental. A story, however, to be well told, must be circumstantially narrated, because it is circumstance only which interests. The silliest persons are, generally, most minute in their attentions, and circumstantial in their stories. If, therefore, a person excel in story-telling, or possess what is called humour, there can be no better evidence that his abilities are not of the first rank.

those works which belong to judgment rather than to fancy; although, at the same time, it abounds with striking similes and bold images, which show what the vigour of a strong mind can produce on such subjects. The pathetic simplicity and romantic wildness of Gray, the descriptive beauties and rural luxuriance of Thomson, and the unaffected tenderness and native ease of Shenstone,<sup>8</sup> as they correspond with the passions, seem to constitute the true spirit of poetry.<sup>9</sup> But such qualities, a mind, accustomed to abstraction, method, and conciseness, cannot, from the correctness which characterises it, readily command. Neither can it, from that dispassionate habit which abstraction

<sup>8</sup> Of the difference between the spirit of the poetry of Pope and that of Shenstone, no other proof will be required than a comparison between their pastorals.

<sup>9</sup> It is said that poetry may become the medium of any species of science, as well as of amusement; and, perhaps, this taste, which prefers fanciful to didactic poetry, will not be generally adopted. The author cannot, however, avoid thinking that didactic or philosophical poetry is an attempt to unite inconsistent things.



induces, enter into the spirit, nor even conceive an idea, of what should be felt by a poet.

A poet or a tragedian writes from sentiment and feeling, but a philosopher or a moralist from knowledge and recollection. The poet, in order to copy nature correctly, puts himself in the place of his characters; endeavours to feel what they are supposed to feel, to catch the enthusiasm of situation, and speak the language of passion.

The property of the philosopher is the causes of things; that of the poet, their effects. The poet has only to delineate things as they are; but the philosopher has to remark their differences, or to unite their related qualities. To the latter of these, Pope evidently approaches nearer than to the former; for his poetry is rather remarks on things than pictures of them. Although, therefore, he holds the first rank in the scale of genius, he must be content to fill only a secondary in that of fancy or poetry.

The truth of that seeming paradox—that

no man can excel in that which is inferior, more than in that which is superior to him, has been proved by experiment. It is evidently true that Dr. Johnson could not paint particular objects in the beautiful and captivating colours of Addison; although it is equally apparent that it was merely because his mind was too great to stoop to such employment; for the Spectator seems only to have furnished the data of the Rambler, and materials for generalization.

## CHAPTER XIV.

GENIUS NOT TO BE ESTIMATED BY THE DEGREE  
OF PLEASURE WHICH ANY PRODUCTION AFFORDS.

**R**EASON alone is that quality which constitutes personal importance, and every species of human excellence. Yet, as amusement is always more agreeable than instruction, the productions of fancy are generally preferred to those of the superior powers of discrimination.

Whatever is curious or refined is lost to persons of slender capacity: wit is not understood, and acute remarks and nice distinctions escape. Extensive reflection, and expanded views, are necessary to a taste for the great. Men of talents only are capable of understanding the works, and doing justice to the merits, of each other. The



applause of mankind is, therefore, generally bestowed upon that which is most suitable to their faculties.

Every person is qualified to judge of style and decoration ; but very few, of the substantial part of composition. Incident and fable have the same effect upon mankind, in all circumstances, and situations ; but pure and unadorned reasoning is capable of interesting only the few. For, as objects are more easily viewed than their qualities comprehended, the flowers of rhetoric, the charms of sentiment, and the beauties of description, must have many admirers, when strength of reasoning, and force of penetration, are neglected.

It is true, principles must be taken from facts. Gold is taken from the earth ; but a quantity of pure gold is of more value than when mixed with the dross of the mine. Brilliancy is, however, always preferred to solidity, and the ornamental to the profound. Uniform abstract thought, as it presents no objects, becomes tiresome. It is no

wonder, therefore, that men confer the highest honour on that which is most agreeable ; that works of amusement hold a superior rank to those of philosophy ; that the narration of facts and enumeration of circumstances are preferred to demonstration ; and the appellation of superior genius bestowed on that which is captivating, rather than on that which is great or profound. Every degree of reasoning is certainly distinct, as it is abstract ; and general ideas are absolutely necessary to accuracy of judgment. But that declamatory style, which is fluent because the matter is incorrect, and harmonious because the expression is indefinite, will command the greater number of admirers ; for, provided the ear be filled with sound, little attention is often paid to subject.

Hence it is the fate of many great authors to be more spoken of than read. With the names of Aristotle, Descartes, Bacon, Locke, and Newton, every person is familiar, but



with their works few are acquainted.<sup>1</sup> While they are considered the ultimate cause of all the wisdom and accuracy of the whole tribe of authors, they are left to their own solitary greatness; and men chuse, for companions, those of a gayer cast and lighter air. Against those giants, however, who divide the intellectual world, detraction dare not raise its voice. But those of the immediately inferior class, who are still too great to please, and serious to amuse, have felt the displeasure of mankind, and have been ranked below those who do not fatigue by teaching, and who are slender enough to be agreeable. Thus, a writer decides in the

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle was certainly one of the greatest men, if not the greatest man, that ever appeared in the world; and generalized more subjects than any other individual. His philosophy maintained its empire over the human mind, till the time of Descartes, who introduced the ideal philosophy; yet Locke, as it were, improving upon his hint, is the person who has done most for that system. But of all those abovementioned, Aristotle may be placed first in rank; and Bacon, although a discoverer and a great man, last. Locke and Newton may be allowed an equality.



negative, the question whether Burke was the author of Junius' Letters, because he considers them inferior to the productions of Burke, and because, in his opinion, their author possessed very good, though not very great, talents.<sup>2</sup> Burke's capacity was undoubtedly very great, as well as very brilliant, and united extensive views with the most various fancy. But, although the Letters of Junius are not so much strewed with similes, and powdered with metaphors, as his productions; yet they far exceed them in compressing extensive subjects within narrow limits, which must be considered the chief indication of strength of mind. The Letters of Junius, after the Orations of Demosthenes, perhaps more than any other work, show "the compacted might of genius."<sup>3</sup>

## M 2

<sup>2</sup> See Bisset's Life of Burke:

<sup>3</sup> Some persons speak of imitating Junius; but it is difficult to see how a person could imitate him, unless he possessed his ability.

Style is merely thought, embodied into expression; and the merit of composition generally consists in that strength of mind which it evinces, or the degree in which it teaches the science of nature. But, on this point, critics are not a little unreasonable. If a book be not abstruse, it is called superficial; and if it be abstruse, too dry to be read. To be adapted to all tastes, therefore, it must combine the general with the particular, and illustrate principles by cases. But that any work can be concise and diffuse at the same time, is impossible. Conciseness seems to consist in omitting particulars, and, therefore, naturally leads to abstraction. But may it not become a question, whether abstraction with brevity, or minuteness with diffusiveness, be preferable? To a man of moderate genius, the former will appear most irksome; to a man of great, the latter. But, perhaps, they are two distinct things, and each may possess its own merit without interfering with the other.

Both are bad in excess, and good in mo-

deration. General principles may be lost in illustration and detail,<sup>4</sup> or minuteness carried so far as to destroy all distinction;<sup>5</sup> while, on the contrary, abstraction may lead to insulated maxims, and conciseness produce rigidity and stiffness. A degree of circumstance gives relief to attention; and as leaves are necessary to shelter fruit, a certain portion of verbiage is required to give ease to sense, and fluency to language.

To compositions addressed to the affections, much thought is always injurious; for, as soon as we turn wise, or begin to make remarks, passion ceases, and reflection commences. To write, therefore, merely to entertain, care must be taken not to overburden the subject with matter, nor to sink

## M 3

4 It has been remarked, that a great book is a great evil. But the maxim seems now to be, that not to write a great book, is not to write a good book. Malthus has written two large volumes to prove that men cannot live without food.

5 This is the fact with regard to Kaimes' "Elements of Criticism."



into insignificance. The point of perfection here is delicate. As insipidity will disgust ; so merit may be too uniform to please, and excellence too great to be consistent with simplicity.

That which is most general is most elegant, and that which is slightest possesses, in the highest degree, the charms of beauty.<sup>6</sup> Strength is always accompanied with some portion of clumsiness ; and a form which is modelled to the nicest symmetry, must partly suffer in robustness. There are two

<sup>6</sup> The Grammont Memoirs, written by Count Hamilton, are admired for their elegance and simplicity ; yet Voltaire has said that nothing could be more trifling than the subject. The truth is, that a statement of facts pleases by its obviousness, while any remark which may now and then occur, like the wild-rose, strikes by its rarity. On the contrary, a collection of general ideas resembles flowers in a garden : all are upon an equality, and each passes without distinction.

Dr. Goldsmith seems to have possessed exactly that degree of genius which corresponds with elegance. Nothing can be more easy and agreeable than his language ; but analyze his dissertations, and you will generally find them both superficial and erroneous. But Sterne is a model of true simplicity.

species of writers ; one whose sole purpose is to improve, and another to amuse ; one who address themselves to the understanding, and another to the passions ; one who regard only acuteness of remark and accuracy of opinion, and another who study merely words and sounds, and who imagine the perfection of all composition consists in harmony of periods.

That work which displays great strength of thought and weight of matter, but which is defective in elegance of expression, is already valuable, and requires only to be put in better dress to become agreeable ; and he who can distinguish between things, can easily, if he chuses, distinguish between words. But that which possesses no other excellence than merely elegance of expression, resembles colour without substance, or is similar to the mathematical definition of a surface—length and breadth without thickness. That style which is not loaded with the greatest degree of thought, will admit the most melodious flow of words, and the most



harmonious periods. But those who are not governed by vulgar prejudice, who prefer reason to fancy, and sense to sound, will endeavour to store the memory with remarks and ideas; with whatever improves judgment, extends knowledge, or enlarges the expanse of the mind; and employ themselves rather in reasoning on, than in delineating things, or arranging words.<sup>7</sup>

The power of expression, however, in recommending the meanest, or debasing the noblest productions of the mind, is incalculable. In poetry, it renders every thing brilliant; perfections shine, and faults be-

<sup>7</sup> The degree of art which appears in literature; and which, in distinction to natural talent, is properly termed acquired, renders it necessary to remark, that the best writer is not always the wisest man. We often find a flow of language where nothing is decided: a person may excel in minute sentiments and the use of trite phrases, without any enlarged views, or uncommon vigour of understanding. Sir William Draper, notwithstanding the elegance of his letters, seems to have been, in the main, a man of but slender talents. On the contrary, many persons could have written Locke's philosophy better than himself, although few could have originally conceived it.



come luminous. Even in prose, by an elegant selection and distribution of words, the most trivial thoughts, and unmeaning compositions, may be imposed upon us for the most important; while the most comprehensive ideas and accurate discriminations may be so debased, by a coarse and vulgar style, as to lose every appearance of excellence. Those really fine thoughts which we admire when cloathed in elegant language, will, in an uncouth dress, no longer appear the same; and we can hardly believe that sense is sense, when degraded by expression.<sup>8</sup> It is, therefore, evident, that the best conceived and noblest plan still requires, before it can be perfect, that its parts be laboured with all the skill of execution, and that the finest

<sup>8</sup> As an instance of genius degraded by expression, that most natural and beautiful of all Pastorals, Allan Ramsay's "Gentle Shepherd," may be here referred to. To a native of South Britain, the language of the Gentle Shepherd must seem an imperfect species of English, and even to a native of North Britain, often artificial Scotch; although this poem contains many beauties, depending on the very peculiar idiom of the Scotch language, which only a Scotchman can relish.

picture must partake of colouring as well as of design. This, however, shows only the necessity of uniting industry and art with genius, the agreeable with the great; and neither exalts the one nor debases the other: style must still remain subordinate to subject, and the manner to the matter; the value of the most exalted production of the mind may be diminished by the dress in which it appears, but the most fluent verbosity, devoid of meaning, can have no value whatever.

Beauty of style and perfection of matter are, indeed, often concomitant. Elegance of style depends chiefly upon distinct comprehension, and clear ideas of the subject on which we are employed.\* Good thoughts, therefore, for the most part, force a style for

\* Delicacy of expression depends on delicacy of thinking. We must be familiarly acquainted with our subject, and long accustomed to revolve our thoughts, before we can express them with ease and elegance. By a little observation, it will appear that all the elegance of Dr. Johnson's style arises from a distinct knowledge of his subject, and a skilful combination of its relations. Mackintosh must, likewise, have been well



themselves. The first and greatest beauty of style is simplicity of arrangement, and delicacy of connection; and surely nothing can be more immediately necessary to perspicuity. The second perfection of style is the choice of the particular matter, which is elegant as it is comprised in general ideas. The next department of style is simile, metaphor, and every species of figure. These qualities of style may be said to be adventitious, and intended merely for ornament, as the matter would suffer no injury in continuity by being deprived of them. But, undoubtedly, propriety of embellishment serves as much to illustrate the subject and enforce reasoning, as to engage attention and exercise imagination. The last requisite of style is expression, which may be divided into the choice and arrangement of words. With regard to the first, we must be directed by general use and the authority of celebrated writers; with regard to the second, that acquainted with his subject, before he could have written so distinct a book as "*Vindiciæ Gallicæ*."



arrangement is most elegant which contrasts, while it combines, the members of a sentence. But the chief beauty of expression is to use the exact number of words necessary, and no more. Another difficulty, however, remains to be mentioned, that is, the art of uniting sentences, and this is the greater as it demands variety as well as connection.

As the term style is used, as a word of general signification, to characterize not only the mode of expression, but the manner of thinking, style and subject may be said to vary together, and the former to exhibit as many diversities as the latter. But, whether composition be grave or light, humorous or satirical, let it always be remembered that beauty consists more in idea than expression; and that it is not inflated language, but propriety of thought, which constitutes a good writer. So important is manner, that style may, in fact, be both elegant and correct, without being agreeable; or it may be agreeable without much elegance or correctness.

## CHAPTER XV.

### JUDGMENT AND IMAGINATION ONLY DIFFERENT APPLICATIONS OF THE MIND.

**W**ORKS of imagination may be preferred to those of judgment ; but both are the produce of one species of talent.

It is very common for remiss thinkers to suppose, that the same thing, in different combinations, or applications, is different. Thus, flame and light are considered as different, because perceived by different organs, although the difference is in us and not in them. The nature of the mind is, in like manner, thought to change with the mode of its operation. Men begin with making it one whole ; but when they find it variously employed, split it into a thousand faculties, such as judgment, memory,

fancy, taste, and conscience.' But it is as great heresy against true philosophy to divide the mind, because its pursuits are different; as it is against true religion, to dissolve the unity of the Deity, and multiply Gods, because events are sometimes the reverse of each other.<sup>2</sup>

The faculties of the mind have a mutual similarity and dependance, in the same man-

<sup>1</sup> There is hardly any end to dividing the powers of the mind, still less of dividing genius into different classes. To characterize every particular talent which has arisen from peculiarity of attention, circumstances, or external causes, as a distinct species of mind, or at least as a distinct species of the same genus of intellectual faculties, tends only to perplex and confound our ideas on the subject. By tracing the operations of the mind in different relations and combinations, they may be exhibited in a variety of lights, and accounted for, with truth and accuracy, under a multiplicity of appellations. The purpose of philosophy is not, however, to multiply, but to simplify, causes, and to trace phænomena to a common origin. It signifies little, therefore, what term intellectual exertions receive, provided they are reduced to an individual act or operation; and, perhaps, the greatest simplification of the efforts of genius would be to denominate them *the association of relations according to our experience.*

<sup>2</sup> Hume says this is the origin of Polytheism.



ner as the qualities of matter are necessarily connected.<sup>3</sup> Where one is present, another cannot be absent.<sup>4</sup> Minds are, therefore, to

3 The mind I would define,—a substance not less real than matter, but totally different. Both are known merely by their qualities; and those of the former are as numerous as those of the latter. The qualities of matter are *magnitude, density, form, extension, &c.*; those of the mind, *consciousness, pleasure and pain, judgment, will, memory, &c.* The qualities of matter have an evident dependence on each other; and those of mind are, in like manner, necessarily connected. We cannot conceive how the qualities of matter could be separated; or how one quality of mind could exist without another. But the qualities of matter have no natural or necessary connection with those of mind, more than those of mind have any necessary connection with those of matter. All the qualities of each may, however, be reduced to one of its own species. Those of matter may be said to consist merely in different modes of *extension*; and those of mind, in different modifications of *thinking*.

4 Pope seems, however, of the common opinion.

“ Thus, in the soul, while memory prevails,  
The solid power of understanding fails;  
Where beams of warm imagination play,  
The memory’s soft figures melt away.”

So far, indeed, as the effects of habit, to be afterwards explained, extend, he is right; but originally the mind possesses all faculties in the same degree.

be discriminated by degrees of excellence of thinking alone, in whatever manner ; not by the distinctions of fancy and judgment, for such are only the distinctions of the appropriation of the same powers.

As all subjects are the same to the mind, unless they differ in extent or complexity, a man of judgment must excel in every thing in proportion to his judgment. To say that a poet is not made, but born, is only to say that greatness of mind cannot be acquired by education, but must be the gift of nature ; which applies to poets no more than to persons of other professions. It is absurd to endeavour to separate genius from wisdom. Is not every effort of imagination perfect as it is wise, and excellent as it is judicious ? Does not every picture of fancy depend upon the propriety of the choice and disposition of the materials ? and are not the most fanciful combinations the result of that comprehension which enables a person to associate remote objects ?

Even those who believe that genius con-



sists in imagination, still think the addition of a certain portion of judgment necessary to its perfection. A vigorous imagination under a just judgment is, in one word, a good understanding. Every thing is performed by the power of thought. Fancy is but a particular use of judgment, and an irregular mode of reasoning.<sup>4</sup>

That two different parts of one and the same principle appear contrary, often arises from the want of that latitude of mind which is necessary to unite them.<sup>5</sup> To say that genius is an incomprehensible quality of the

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4 "Oft in her" (Reason's) "absence, mimic Fancy wakes  
To imitate her; but misjoining shapes,  
Wild work produces oft———."

5 On the saying of Dr. Johnson, "The supposition of one man having more imagination, another more judgment, is not true. It is only one man has more mind than another—Sir, the man who has vigour may walk to the east as well as to the west, if he happens to turn his head that way," a Reviewer has this remark:—"Had Dr. Johnson never said any thing better or wiser than the above, we should have had no hesitation to set him down as the most consummate of all blockheads."



mind, different from perfection of understanding, is the common refuge of those who are incapable of definition and analysis, and who wish to hide deficiency of capacity in impenetrable mystery. But the progress by which nature accomplishes all her ends is distinctly marked. It requires only a little pains in tracing the operations of the mind, to discover, that comprehension is the origin of both reasoning and invention ; that energy of intellect is the source of all literary excellence, the centre from which every beauty emanates. It requires only examination to perceive that, wherever the mind is employed, judgment and perfection are one ; that good sense and good writing are the same ; that sublimity and wisdom are always united ; and that the most admired passages of Shakespeare would not be poetically beautiful, if they were not philosophically excellent.

We must, therefore, consider the inspiration of a poet, so long talked of by the world, merely as a figurative expression, or a term

of enthusiastic admiration, similar to that which a person addresses to his mistress, when he exalts her above the rest of the species, with the fallacy of which he who makes use of it is well acquainted ; for poetry is, certainly, as far mechanical, or as much dependant on the ordinary operations of the mind, as any other science.<sup>6</sup>

Judgment consists both in separating and uniting qualities ; fancy apparently in combining only. But surely the latter cannot be produced without comparison, more than the former. Instead of proceeding from a particular faculty, it is not a separate operation of the mind. To make choice of the ingredients of fancy, and pick out from nature the objects of description, does not seem different from that operation by which we draw from facts the deductions of reason. In

## N 2

<sup>6</sup> This is, perhaps, the reason why Dr. Johnson asserted, that there is as much pleasure in writing a page of a Dictionary as one of poetry ; meaning, no doubt, that labour is necessary to both, and that labour can never be pleasant.



what also consists the peculiarity of that most irregular of all species of writing—lyric poetry, if it be not in leaving incomplete the chain of reasoning, and passing from one sentiment to another, dropping intermediate ideas?

Every production of fancy—whether invention of plan, or variety and elegance of execution, is the result of the same precision of thought and acuteness of distinction, as the most abstracted works of judgment. They, therefore, both engage the mind in discrimination, and employ the same faculties in the same manner.

He who possesses great powers, and exercises them in vigilant observation and diligent remark, understands fully the nature of things, is sensible what produces every effect upon the passions of mankind, perceives clearly the operations of the human mind in every involution of interest, and knows distinctly in what literary perfection consists. As, again, the memory is always proportioned to the judgment, his mind must



form a store of maxims and images, from which he can chuse either an ethic or a picture, and produce an effect in the form of judgment or imagination, as he desires.<sup>7</sup>

## N 3

<sup>7</sup> Watts and Beattie both wrote poetry and metaphysics; the former excelling in metaphysics, and the latter in poetry. But Chapters XI. and XIX. will explain why better instances are not to be found.

## CHAPTER XVI.

FANCY BUT AN INFERIOR DEGREE OF JUDGMENT,  
AND SUBSERVIENT TO A HIGHER.

THAT a person succeeds in works of imagination to a greater degree than in those of judgment, may be accounted for by saying that he has studied the former more than the latter. But still another remark occurs. Although both are the same to the mind, it is, however, only in proportion as they engage it. As works of imagination require a less portion of exertion, so they discover less of the excellence of the mind than those of judgment.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The author of the "Tale of a Tub," indeed, says, that judgment is inferior to fancy, which last he calls genius; because genius forms the general plan, and prudence has then only to conduct the execution of it. In this remark, besides

Imagination and judgment are, indeed, different, as far as degree can make them; and it is apparent, that, although the superior portion of intellect includes the inferior, the inferior does not include the superior. A mind formed for embracing extensive subjects, and calculated for abstract discussion, may descend to those which are fanciful, diffuse, and superficial. But there is no possibility, that capacity, which is adapted only to these inferior subjects, will ever rise above itself; become more comprehensive and acute than nature made it; or be qualified for those employments which exceed its powers. Yet men are always inclined to value every production as it is useful and

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taking different degrees of the same quality for distinct things, and placing the inferior degree above the superior, he confounds *judgment* with *prudence*. Judgment and prudence are as entirely different as any two things can be. Judgment depends upon the excellence of the mind; but prudence, on the strength or weakness of the passions; for it is a lamentable fact, that those who possess the best understandings are not always the most prudent.



agreeable, rather than as it is difficult ; and to consider more the tendency which it has to flatter their passions, than its relation to the understanding. Hence they are led into delusions which are too agreeable to be readily forsaken, and which have at last become so venerable, by antiquity, as nearly to prohibit examination.

But what is generally termed superior genius, is as far inferior to a sound understanding, as objects are to ideas, and as passions are to remarks made on them. Judgment penetrates into things, to discover their nature, their excellencies, and defects ; but fancy only touches the surface of them, to point out beauties, or qualities which disgust ; and the one may be compared to strength, and the other to activity.

That mind which, by the power of description, the blaze of rhetoric, or the bewildering images of declamation, amuses the passions, and misleads the understanding, is as far inferior to one which evinces judgment by discrimination, as that which judgment is

employed upon is to judgment itself. By description, we are supplied only with the data of thinking; reasoning still remains to be made upon the facts or objects which fancy presents to us.

The pictures of imagination are only abstracts of the world, for the philosopher and moralist to exercise their reflection, and make their remarks upon, and from which to deduce the principles which govern mankind. Fancy, like a book of travels, saves them merely the trouble of making journies and traversing nature.

Fancy sometimes acts merely as a mirror to nature, representing it in all its original disorder; sometimes it exaggerates or diminishes its features; and at other times it adds to its variety, by uniting things never before united. But however new the combinations, they never lead to simplification or generalization. As the beauty and excellence of every work of imagination consist in fidelity of painting; judgment, to remove the original confusion of those things



from which fancy is taken, has still the labour of separating qualities, and of forming facts into principles.<sup>9</sup> Homer merely furnished the materials from which Aristotle drew his Poetics.

That diffusive irregularity to which the world has agreed to give the first place in genius, forms a contradiction to regular excellence, and derives its pre-eminence from its imperfection. As it is the more confused and wandering, the more it seems to excel. The superior lustre of the beauties which it contains, arises solely from their inconsistency with method and regularity.<sup>1</sup> Any ex-

9 “—————In the soul  
Are many lesser faculties, that serve,  
Reason as chief; among these, fancy next  
Her office holds; of all external things,  
Which the five watchful senses represent,  
She forms imaginations, aery shapes,  
Which reason joining or disjoining, frames  
All what we affirm, or what deny, and call  
Our knowledge or opinion—————.”

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Beattie says,—“Rousseau is a great philosophical genius, but wild, irregular, and self-contradictory.” But what



cellence strikes us with more force, the more abruptly it breaks forth upon us, or the more suddenly it presents itself to view. The more, likewise, the beauties of any work of literature are confused and scattered, the greater their number will appear. For, when we see a few, we think there are more ; and a great many, without order, like the stars which fill the heavens, seem innumerable. But as arrangement is the sole difficulty to the mind, irregular beauty is as far inferior to true superior genius, as materials are to workmanship, or execution is to design.

Nothing, in reality, but the blind veneration of what is unknown, and reluctance to dissipate that ignorance which is so conge-

kind of philosophy or genius is that which is wild, irregular, and contradictory ! Irregularity arises merely from want of comprehension, and consequently from want of genius. The more distinct our ideas are, the nearer they approach perfection. What is all capacity but clear ideas ? What more can we do for any subject than to put it in a clear light ? The greatest ability is to see things aright !

nial to the natural superstition of the human mind, could induce a preference of association founded on superficial resemblance, to chastised order and extended connection. At the same time, it is apparent, that the degree of capacity which is necessary to what is great, is repugnant to that which is pleasant.

A person of a strong mind discovers his abilities rather in pointed sayings, and comprehensive axioms, than in flowing eloquence and expanded enumeration; while another of inferior powers mingles facts with arguments, and pursues his way, through the course of events, by an instinct which is pleasant, because natural. Sterne possessed that lesser excellence and smaller degree of intellect—commonly called genius, if ever man did; for, in him, the enthusiastic admirers of irregularity will find that confusion which they desire, joined with considerable judgment, fancy, however, predominating. How many general principles and maxims



does he give with accuracy ! But how much more excellent is he in describing and tracing a train of the most minute circumstances, and following nature in her various windings, when conducting events and displaying the emotions of the heart. But, in the pathetic, Sterne is excelled by no writer, ancient or modern. Dr. Johnson, again, in sentiment, is awkward ; in narration, brief and dry ; and if he were to be judged of by his art in telling a story, must be pronounced a man of no ability.<sup>2</sup> When he attempts enumeration, he seems to do a thing foreign to his nature ; and, although its excellence must be admitted, yet his particulars have always a general cast, and, in reality, in-

<sup>2</sup> Longinus gives much the same description of Demosthenes.—“ Demosthenes,” says he, “ has been unsuccessful in representing the humours and characters of men. He was a stranger to diffusive eloquence ; awkward in his address, void of all pomp and show in his language ; where his subject compels him to be merry or facetious, he makes people laugh, but it is at himself ; and the more he endeavours at raillery, the more distant he is from it.”



clude many subordinate. In short, he possessed so much judgment as to leave no room in his mind for what is called genius, and was so much abstracted in reasoning as to be incapable of attending to objects alone. Dr. Hawkesworth imitated him, and it is obvious that he excelled him in fancy, because he was inferior to him in judgment.<sup>3</sup> It is equally apparent that it was because Dr. Johnson was so much superior to Addison, and because his understanding was too correct to admit fancy or irregular thinking, that he could not write in his light and beautiful manner, or in those glowing colours which are pleasant by being near the surface of things.

The powers of the mind are so much the same, and its qualities so nearly allied, that a person cannot possess judgment without a portion of what is called genius, nor can he possess fancy without some degree of judg-

<sup>3</sup> The author of *Lexiphanes* says, "Dr. Hawkesworth is far superior, in fancy, to Dr. Johnson."

ment, because they are only more or less of the same thing. Were the mind, indeed, capable of descending, or of suspending its powers of discrimination, at pleasure, a person would possess imagination always in proportion to his judgment. But as imagination is only a more imperfect species of judgment, or vague manner of combination, the position must be reversed. It may, therefore, be said, that a person possesses the former as he wants the latter; that is, the mind is confused as it is narrow, fanciful as it is irregular, and wandering as it is deficient in general ideas.

Those who cannot think correctly, must think irregularly. When a person's mental powers are not so great as to deserve the appellation of judgment, they must necessarily acquire a title to that of fancy or imagination. Talent is always light and airy as it is superficial, and mysterious as it is obscure and undefined. Yet, we must not hastily conclude, that whatever is not of remote deduction, or reduced to direct method, is



devoid of merit. Such is the nature of the intellect, that it is confined to no particular mode of exertion. Genius can assume any shape ; and its degree may, though less accurately in some cases than in others, be known on every subject and in every operation.

At first view, *history* discovers little ability. Events are copiously supplied by nature, and the historian's business seems to be merely to narrate them. But are not materials furnished to every performance ? Has not a historian to distinguish truth from fable, and that which is important from that which is uninteresting ? Has he not, in short, to weave facts into a consistent design ? and what more appears in any intellectual performance ? History may, indeed, be a mere narration, without discrimination, but it may likewise rise to considerable dignity. That period of Hume, beginning with the reign of Charles I. and ending with the death of Cromwell, is without parallel in the annals of the world. In it, we view all modes



of government, a mild monarchy, a republic, a despotism ; together with every species of religion. It may truly be called “ philosophy teaching by experience,” and is every way worthy of the author of the *Essays*.

*An extensive epic-poem*, in some degree, resembles an extensive moral or physical system ; and, although a fanciful production, may rank with a philosophical. To invent and discover, are the same. We perceive an expansion of intellect in the works of Homer and Milton, equal to that which appears in those of Newton or Locke ; and cannot hesitate to rank the former with the latter. It is true, that greatness of mind is never shown but by arrangement, or something which resembles it. But comprehension may be discovered by the plan of a work of entertainment no less than by a system of philosophy ; and, perhaps, every degree of talent may be displayed by the former as well as by the latter.\* A moderate portion

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\* If we represent fancy as inferior to judgment, we exhi-

of genius is likewise capable of being shown by the execution of both ; and judicious disposition of incident, and propriety of character, may be allowed to rank with wise remarks, and pertinent reflections. In poetry, however, and some other works of entertainment, execution is peculiarly difficult. The impassioned language of *tragedy*, as well as the fire of *lyric poetry*, requires no mean powers. The natural painting of manners, and delicate raillery of *comedy*, although connected with habit, also bear a correspondence with a considerable portion of intellect. But, unless any mental operation exhibit both extensive and novel association, it indicates no superior talents ; as there are few persons who cannot decide correctly within a narrow circle, or distinguish between right and wrong where there is no great intricacy.

There can, however, hardly be named, a person who excels in execution and delineation

only a less degree of the same thing ; and if we represent it as equal, we, in fact, make them one.

tion remarkably deficient in method. Ovid, Ariosto, Spenser, all discover system and connection; the latter, indeed, of the most elaborate, if not the most original, kind. Yet genius does not consist in numerous ideas, however beautiful, inaccurately combined.

There are, indeed, some who display that extent of mind in execution, which others do in design. Butler is an author universally admired; yet nothing could be more remarkably imperfect than the fable of his *Hudibras*. Besides being an imitation, it is defective in unity; and, viewing it with relation to the chief end of all works of fancy, capable of exciting very little interest. We must, therefore, look for his genius in those numerous scattered passages of wit and wisdom, which could have flowed only from the most expanded contemplation, and for which the substance of the poem seems to have served only as a vehicle. Even Shakespeare, in the outlines and conduct of his dramas, does not, in general, exhibit any



degree of excellence, of which inferior genius is incapable; perhaps because his subjects are oftener adopted than invented, and do not belong so much to fiction as to fact. For a complete instance of inconsistency and want of method, we need go no farther than the tragedy of Hamlet. Shakespeare, as he seldom produces a complete design, or excites any interest which is not interrupted, does not, perhaps, possess, in a high degree, the power of moving the passions. His chief merit seems to consist in separate pictures, and exquisite pieces of detached poetry. However deficient he may be in regularity, he never fails to discover general knowledge, and a deep insight into human nature. It is possible to describe a species under the guise of an individual, and to reduce a science to the simplicity of a single expression. On every subject, only one very appropriate reflection can be made, and that he never fails to produce. Those individual beauties, so frequent in his works, are to be considered more as general than particular

ideas. In them, we perceive the principles of universal excellence, and talents which might have been varied to every attainment.

It is, therefore, only those works of fancy, in which particulars are delineated, or facts narrated, without method, and which show neither plan in the whole, nor general views in the parts, which are to be considered as displaying no portion of the higher rank of genius, or superior degree of judgment. To assemble facts, without regularity, in poems and *novels*, as they are offered by the world, requires no other art than that of copying them accurately; and, as all operations of the mind are valuable only as they are correct, fancy excels merely as it resembles judgment, or evinces the possession of it.

## CHAPTER XVII.

DIFFERENCE OF SUBJECT CREATES DIFFERENCE OF  
SUCCESS, AND ENABLES ONE MIND TO EXCEL  
ANOTHER.

THERE is nothing which either exalts or degrades genius more than the manner of its employment; and, so far, literary merit is casual. That this has proved a fruitful source of applause and censure to men of talents, is evident, from the inequality of the same person's productions; and hence it is incontestibly proved, that a person may stumble on such a thing as a happy subject, or that coincidence of circumstances with his own exertions which enables him to surpass others, and even to excel himself. What can ability accomplish without favourable circum-



stances ! and how far do favourable circumstances supply the place of ability !

What opportunity is in action, subject is in literature. A rich subject communicates its treasures to the mind, stimulates effort, and calls forth all its perfections ; while a dull subject extinguishes animation, renders negative every talent, and reduces the intellect to the level of its own barrenness.

The mind can represent objects only as they are presented to it. It possesses, indeed, the power of selection ; but as selection consists merely in rejecting what is bad, the highest effort of genius can never go beyond a just representation of any subject. One author may succeed where another has failed ; but still the beauties of the most celebrated are to be found in his subject. It is evident, therefore, that literary excellence is, in no small degree, at the mercy of circumstances ; and that the concurrence of fortune is, in some measure, necessary to the production of heroes in the Republic of Letters, as well as in politics.

A certain *boldness or originality*, more the produce of accident than of design, will be found the chief merit of every work which has, to any great degree, engaged the attention of mankind.

Of the originality of the ancients, it is difficult to judge. They enjoyed the first harvest, and nothing remains to the moderns but to glean what is left. Yet, in this respect, advantages are apparently equal: If the moderns are deprived of priority, the ancients were without models, and the concentrated wisdom of mankind.

Homer, as the first of epic poets, independently of the excellence of his execution, may claim a perfect originality; although it has been suggested that Homer may be original only because all prior authors are lost. As most sciences are the work of many, it seems remarkable that one man, without an example of any kind, should have brought a particular species of writing so near perfection, that no improvement has been made since his time.

In writing epic poems after Homer, unless they deviate as far from his plan as the *Dunciad*, or the *Rape of the Lock*, little other merit is to be discovered than that of increasing the multitude of books. To these, the *Iliad* seems to have furnished merely a hint or suggestion. An imitation may be so amplified, and connected with new circumstances, as to exceed the original; for instance, the *Dunciad*, so far as it is founded on *Macflecnoe*. But the *Æneid*, *Pharsalia*, and *Jerusalem Delivered*, add little to the variety of our ideas. The second is, in fact, nothing more than a history in verse, and all three are valued merely for the skill displayed in their execution. That judgment of the Italians, therefore, which prefers *Ariosto* to *Tasso*, seems just. Both depend for reputation on execution, and the execution of the former, though not original, has been less frequently copied, and is more natural than that of the latter.

Among the moderns, *Cervantes*, *Swift*, and *Bunyan*, are the authors most distin-



guished for originality. The Pilgrim's Progress is, indeed, one of those subjects which may be said to have been made; and is a remarkable work of its kind. Yet the originality is not so great as it seems. One allegory, however different the subject, is but an imitation of another.

An absolute or perfect originality is not, however, necessary to excellence. There is, indeed, hardly such a thing; and, if there were, it would be more an evidence of good fortune than of genius. Those works which have the best claim to it, are founded upon some hint which is carried farther by the succeeding author than by his predecessor. But, in general, each collects from many, and adds a little of his own. Not only are there fixed rules of language, a limited number of figures, and a common stock of images; but it is impossible to search far without discovering a set of tales and incidents which one person receives from another by hereditary succession. No author would seem more original than Ariosto, were

it not known how much he derived from Boyardo, the romance writers, and the ancient classics. Swift, Rabelais, and the authors of the Arabian Nights' Entertainments, are also much indebted to their predecessors.

It is sufficient that a subject, to be bold and striking, be founded on some *general principle* of nature. Thus, the two plays of Shakespeare which approach nearest to perfection, Othello and Macbeth, have, for their subjects, each a single passion of human nature; the first, that of jealousy, the second, ambition. Hence, the parts of each of these plays tend, as it were, to a common centre; and hence, combined with the genius of Shakespeare, perhaps, arises all their sublimity.

On a small scale, in subject, no one excels Pope. His subjects are, for the most part, neither found nor invented. They are chosen; but are always of a general nature, and tend to depict some strong feature of things.

However easily it may seem made, no-



thing is so rare as a good selection. Pope, in fact, shows more of that force of mind which grasps general ideas, or is, in short, a greater genius, than the favourite poet of the Italians. Had the latter, instead of collecting all the stories which time has furnished, selected only those which are excellent, he would, with his style and manner, have produced a work which the world could not equal. Where, therefore, he has failed, Pope has succeeded. The materials of every performance, excepting in the earliest ages, have been supplied more by reading than by nature. Books are chiefly made from books ; and in what is all genius shown, if it be not in selection ?

But of the power of subject, there is not a more remarkable instance than *Paradise Lost*. Milton, from having raised so stupendous a fabric from such scanty materials, has an undeniable claim to the merit of invention. *Paradise Lost* seems, indeed, a kind of creation ; when reading it, we feel as if transported to a new world. Such a



subject, like a valuable diamond, is seldom to be met with ; but, when found, makes a person's fortune.

Notwithstanding the priority of the *Iliad* as an epic poem, it seems, as a work of literature, to yield, in originality as well as dignity, to *Paradise Lost*.

The real, the unlaboured, and simple sublimity, resulting from the subject alone of *Paradise Lost*, gives to the *Iliad* an artificial appearance, and renders the genius of Homer puerile and nugatory. The superior dignity and excellence of this poem do not, however, form a greater contrast with the works of any other poet than with those of the author himself. *Paradise Regained* is an instance to prove that the greatest genius cannot create a subject to itself, nor exercise its abilities independently of circumstances ; and that Milton could not produce any thing equally excellent with *Paradise Lost*, and, at the same time, different.

It is, perhaps, difficult to determine whether the preference, with regard to ability,

belongs to the author of the Iliad, or to that of Paradise Lost.

The great harmony in the disposition of parts and introduction of incident, the variety of character, which the Iliad displays; the propriety of its sentiments; its dignity and pathos,<sup>5</sup>—evinced considerable extent of mind; and in faithful delineation of nature, animation of description, and beauty of simile, Homer stands unrivalled. But the Iliad is entirely destitute of that science and learning<sup>6</sup> which appear in Paradise Lost, and which, while they seem to have been the produce of a greater mind than that of the author of the Iliad, create a prejudice against its minor efforts, by stiffening description and banishing ornament.

In the general conduct of his work, Ho-

<sup>5</sup> We forbear to mention Homer's sublimity. "After Milton, Homer may be allowed to be majestic, but can hardly be admitted to be great. Before the greatness displayed in Milton's poem, all other greatness shrinks away."

<sup>6</sup> These are certainly *poetical* blemishes, but we speak only with regard to ability.



mer has little of which he can boast. The wrath of Achilles is one of those trifling causes, which sometimes, by a remarkable concurrence of circumstances, produce great events; his combats are wretched, his partiality disgusting, and the exploits of his heroes improbable; the wisdom of Ulysses is puerile, and his Deities are actuated by the worst of human passions.

In the Iliad, every thing is calculated for embellishment; every beauty superficial, every reflection obvious. No doubt, a considerable knowledge of men and manners appears in this poem; but it appears chiefly by implication. It is, therefore, to be considered as, in a great measure, descriptive;<sup>7</sup> and excepting *narration*, description is the *meanest* of literary employments. But if a person, when engaged in description, discover an extraordinary degree of strength of painting, and richness of colouring, he may, perhaps, be allowed to rank among those who have displayed their talents in the more

<sup>7</sup> Of *manners* and *action*, for the most part, however.



unequivocal mode of reasoning. As all plans are not great, so neither is all execution mean ; as there is a difference, so there may be various degrees of excellence, in both. Every person may be capable of composing metaphors and chusing similes ; but the metaphors of one will be stronger, and the similes better, than those of another.

Homer excels in the particular ; Milton in the general. The latter has, indeed, some faults, although few, of a general nature, such as the allegory of sin and death, and the Paradise of Fools, besides one arising from his subject—the contradiction between spirit and matter. But, on the whole, it may be said—that the *Iliad* exhibits more of that portion of mind called imagination, and less of that denominated judgment, than *Paradise Lost* ; that while the former takes the greatest hold of the passions, the latter is best calculated to exercise the understanding ; that while the one displays most beauty, the other shows most sublimity ; while

that excites our love, this commands our admiration.

Part, however, of Homer's inferiority undoubtedly arises from his subject; for what Milton has gained by subject, Homer has lost. Homer, to encrease the dignity of his heroes, is obliged to clothe them with qualities so far superior to human nature, that the idea of men is lost under them, and nothing remains but bombastical epithets or unnatural attributes, which we find it impossible to apply to human beings. When Hector and Ajax are made to hurl rocks against each other, the mind is shocked at the absurdity of the scene, and turns away with disgust, because it perceives human nature no longer. By exalting them so far above their original condition, he has changed their nature, and deprived us of all interest which we could take in their concerns as fellow creatures. As what is natural only can be good, to such extensions of the powers of mankind, may be applied the words of Macbeth, which

show perfectly the boundaries of the sublime :—

“ I dare do all that may become a man,  
Who dares do more, is none.”

When greatness and probability are united, or when sublimity can be preserved without the violation of nature, as the mind can most easily appropriate that which is nearest to our own condition, as well as admire that which is farthest raised above it, we receive the highest pleasure. That which is too nearly on a level with ourselves, can create no idea of sublimity ; and that which is too far raised above us, no sympathy. Whatever, therefore, is interesting, must be neither too high nor too low, but form a medium between extremities.

There are some qualities which can never be united, and which are always repugnant. When found in the same object, they uniformly produce contrast, inconsistency, and unnatural ideas. The greatest character is the nearest to perfection of a species. While



the personages of Milton are kept within their own province, and submit to the laws of probability and propriety, neither the Deities of Homer appear as Gods, nor his human characters as men. The former possess many of the weaknesses of mankind, and the latter many divine qualities. His Deities sometimes govern his human characters, and his human characters are sometimes superior in power to his Deities. The reason of all this is, that Homer's subject is human affairs exaggerated; Milton's, divine, drawn in their real colours; and that the heroes of the former are chiefly terrestrial, those of the latter celestial. The characters of Homer are artificially, those of Milton naturally, great. While the former is compelled to exalt men to Gods, and to degrade Gods to men, the latter is required only to draw both as they are. Our sympathy, in the one case, is checked by inconsistency; in the other, aided by propriety.

Milton's subject combines the probable with the great. It is prior to nature, extends

beyond it, or is a new nature, and does not require conformity to the present state of the creation. His heroes are not unnatural; but only superior to nature. They are more than men, and can bear qualities which human nature would sink under.

Milton's subject is great, because extraordinary; and interesting, by being philosophically correct, and founded on the nature of things. There is nothing contrary to the assent of judgment, or inconsistent with chaste imagination, that, in the war of spirits,

“ —————The starry cope  
Of Heav'n, perhaps, or all the elements  
At least had gone to wreck—————;”

nor is there any exaggeration in the idea that those who are superior to the laws of nature could change them. But as the actions of Gods are unsuitable to men, that which is great and grand in Milton's heroes, by being agreeable to truth or probability, would, from the contrary reason, be a ridiculous appendage of any human being. To

ascribe the actions of Gods to men, or those of men to Gods, is to exalt human characters above, and to degrade divine below, their real condition, to produce incongruity and absurdity.

Milton is an abstruse poet, and his is, perhaps, the only abstruse subject compatible with fancy, or adapted to poetry.<sup>8</sup> The origin of nature, the formation and destruction of worlds, the contention of elements, and, in short, “the revolutions of heaven and earth,” require only to be put into words to be great and grand. In comparison with these the affairs of men are trifling, and the combats of Homer’s heroes “as unimportant as the skirmishes of the

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<sup>8</sup> Most of our philosophical poems, the prevalence of which at present shows that, in refined society, correctness of thinking takes place of enthusiastic imagination, are incongruous monsters, which attempt to join labour with amusement. When amusement can be blended with instruction, it is very well; but, in that case, labour must be absent, for labour can never amuse. Of all philosophical poets, Akenside is, perhaps, the best.



birds of the air." Instead of Milton's sublimity requiring effort, it seems impossible to have written on such subjects without it.

"The dark unbottom'd infinite abyss"

"———The void profound

Of unessential night———"

"———Black it stood as night,

Fierce as ten furies, terrible as hell"

"———Hell trembled as he strode"

"———Death

Grinn'd horrible, a ghastly smile"

are ideas and expressions, which appear to be great without effort, and are, perhaps, sublime without intention. It is impossible to conceive another subject, equal, in natural grandeur and true sublimity, to *Paradise Lost*. In *Paradise Lost*, every thing is so agreeable to probability, that it forms, perhaps, the best philosophical system of the origin of nature ; and so new as to be different from the present state of things.

With regard to this poem, the subject may be considered as containing half the merit of the performance. As foreign causes, therefore, may assist a person in the accom-

plishment of his purposes, as well as counteract his success, we ought no more to add their influence to his capacity in the one case, than to deduct it in the other.

So much, however, depends upon occasion and exertion, that nothing can be more difficult than to distinguish that portion of excellence which belongs to nature, from that which belongs to accident. There are certainly many persons capable of forming extensive arrangements, and treating general subjects, who have never made the attempt. The abilities of some may, no doubt, be ascertained, by acuteness displayed in particular exertions, but the conclusion can never be depended on. It is difficult to say what those powers which are exerted on a confined scale would have been, had they been exerted on an extensive. From the clearness of Pope's ideas, the conciseness, the elegance, and energy of his language, talents of the first rank are to be inferred; but still, had he never written the "Rape of the Lock," their extent would have been

only matter of conjecture. After this poem, which yields to the *Iliad*, perhaps, more in the magnitude, than in the variety and beauty, of its parts, it may be thought merely a refinement on words to say that Pope is not a poet. If, however, we consider the general characteristic of his poetry, the *Rape of the Lock* will be found an exception. The poetry of Pope is undoubtedly pleasant; but it pleases more by being reasonable than fanciful. There is, too, a play of fancy in it, but it is within narrow limits. The substance is always of a general nature; the fancy merely ornamental.

The *Rape of the Lock* shows the strength of those powers which were capable of such versatility, of passing from extremes so great and excelling in departments so very different. But, at the same time, it is an instance to prove that fancy and judgment are one and the same.

Pope seems to have been capable of every thing. He is unquestionably the second of British poets; and why not the first? Mere-



ly because he was less fortunate than Milton in opportunity, and more confined in the subject on which he exerted his talents.

Hence literary greatness is, in some degree, reduced to the level of all other greatness ; depending on the concurrence of many circumstances ; but with this difference, that, when a person is distinguished in literature, the powers of his mind are undoubted, while distinction in active pursuits leaves the question of intellectual capacity undecided. The difficulty in literature, is not with regard to the talents displayed, but with regard to those which have never been exerted. We may rely upon the greatness of the former ; but cannot know how many, among mankind, may possess equal.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### CORPOREAL TALENTS TO BE DISTINGUISHED FROM MENTAL.

NOTHING can be more absurd than the notion that a person is born with a genius for a particular subject, fitted to that subject and to no other ; and that every difference of literary labour requires, not more or less, but a different species of mind.

Of subject, considered with regard to genius, the only difference seems to be between that which requires the application of the mind, and that which requires the application of the body ; and of talents, between corporeal and mental. Specific inequality and opposition of talent, in the same person, appears, setting aside habit, merely contradiction of body and mind.

In one profession, however, the essential

requisites are, no doubt, mental ; and cannot, therefore, be ranked among the peculiarities of corporeal conformation. But to these intellectual powers, it is so indispensibly necessary to unite certain constitutional qualities, that the former are entirely useless without the latter. For the purpose of excelling in *public speaking*, to good sense and the habit of facility and elegance of expression, must be added that strength of nerve and coolness of temper which gives a person the full possession of his faculties, and the perfect command of his attention.

In this case, corporeal accomplishments are rendered subservient to the display of mental talents. But, in other professions, such as theatrical exhibition, or musical performance, the body is almost the sole agent, and the mind has hardly any share. Hence, in treating of the mind, care must be taken to separate all occupations, in which men, by the possession of bodily faculties, may, in any degree, become eminent, from those requiring intellectual efforts.



Almost all the lower employments of life demand little or no mental ability, or at least no superior intellectual endowments. For, as the greater part of mankind are engaged in them, it is necessary they should be simple, both in theory and practice, that all may be capable of exercising them. That facility, indeed, with which the business of extensive manufactories is performed, and with which the nicest specimens of art are executed, owes its origin to the superior capacity of individuals. From their genius, is derived the invention of machinery, and peculiar modes of operation, which contribute so much to the abridgement and perfection of human labour.

The imitations of *sculpture*, although, in general, confined to individuals, still possess an outline capable of originality, and may discover some degree of force of mind and vigour of genius. But all that brilliancy of execution, which we so much admire in *engravings*, and other beautiful specimens of the arts, can be taken for no indication of

mental excellence, and ought to be esteemed as nothing more than neatness, and the perfection of custom in the application of bodily faculties. The organs of some are, no doubt, better fitted for the attainment of skill and delicacy,<sup>1</sup> and the minds of some more disposed to cultivate corporeal talents, than those of others. But, as no capacity is so small as not to be qualified for physical employments, in them, the intellect must be viewed only as under the influence of a particular passion, and as having its attention engaged without its force being exerted. “The soul often stands an idle spectator of the labour of the hands and the expedition of the feet.”

Among mechanical arts, *painting* is not the least, and the representation of some great historical event is, undoubtedly, the

<sup>1</sup> Engraving, as a drawing must always precede, is merely execution; and if any person receive the appellation of a great genius, on account of his excellence in that art, he is indebted for it to the steadiness of his muscles, or the conformation of his fingers.

highest effort of painting. But, even in a historical picture, the choice of the action, or the dignity of the whole, is never so much regarded, as the fidelity with which the parts are delineated, and the resemblance which they individually bear to nature. It may, indeed, be objected, that, in painting, nature is never exactly imitated; that even in landscape and portrait painting, there is a portion of design or generalization. But the room for discrimination is never great. The time of a historical picture is said to be an instant, and turns always upon a circumstance. In painting, as in poetry, it is not design, but execution or expression, which is chiefly valued. Although, therefore, a person may have a good claim to the epithet of a great painter, it can be no evidence that he has much to that of a great genius.<sup>2</sup>

The power of *theatrical exhibition*, is, un-

<sup>2</sup> The mind is, indeed, little engaged in painting, and it is probable that the greatest painters were not to be distinguished from common men in intellectual accomplishments. The writings of Sir Joshua Reynolds, and particularly his *Essay*



doubtedly, one of those qualifications which are to be distinguished from the faculties of the mind. For, it is evident, that no studying, or even conception of character, or other abstract theatrical excellence, can qualify any person for the representation of manners, without that flexibility of body which, in this case, is so eminently necessary. The excellence of theatrical representation depends more upon facility of imitating the peculiarities of human action, and displaying the passions of the soul, in the gestures of the body, and features of the face, than in any superior force of understanding. Here, all is easily conceived, but not easily executed ; and simple to the mind, but difficult to the body. Had Garrick possessed no other talents than those which his plays exhibit, we should have never heard half the praise which has been bestowed upon him ; and had the greatness

on Beauty, in the Idler, prove that he was a man of genius, as well as a great painter ; but this union of talents was accidental.

of Shakespeare's mind not been more evident than his excellence as an actor, his name would, certainly, not have been, at this day, recollected.<sup>3</sup> Theatrical abilities require so little assistance from judgment, and so small a portion of the powers of the mind, that eminent performers have been known, whose intellectual capacity scarcely exceeded that degree of reason called instinct. But the stage is a profession which contains more show and splendour than, perhaps, any other; and is, on that account, highly gratifying to both spectators and actors. For what will so powerfully influence our generosity and praise, as that which administers directly to our pleasures; and what, again, can be so agreeable and flattering, as the liberality and applause of multitudes.<sup>4</sup> There is, however, seldom any

3 Shakespeare is said to have been an actor; but his ability, in that line, never extended farther than the part of the Ghost, in his own play of Hamlet.

4 The difference between the fortunes of authors and actors forms a very severe satire on the selfishness and frivolity of



good which is not balanced by an equal degree of evil. On the other hand, what can be more mortifying to one, who possesses mental ability, than to be under the necessity of a disadvantageous competition of bodily faculties with his inferior in all those qualities which dignify and adorn the mind ; and what so humiliating, as to be obliged to stoop to such a person, and allow him to carry off the prize of applause !

A talent for *musical performance* is still more closely a corporeal accomplishment,

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mankind. While the latter, for serving the luxuries of the public, enjoy, without labour, risk, or anxiety, all the comforts which riches bestow ; the former, as a recompense for instructing and improving mankind,—for consuming their minds in anxious speculations, and exhausting their bodies in painful application, are left to pine in penury and wretchedness. A professed author must be considered as sacrificing his comfort to his fame ; and, if the sense of his superiority, and the consciousness that his name will flourish when the recollection of the children of this world has perished, did not form a pleasure far more refined than sensual gratification, much better for him to have chosen the meanest of trades, and the lowest of mechanical professions.



than those qualifications which are necessary to theatrical representation ; as, in the latter, may be found some share of judgment in directing the body, and governing the propriety of its application. Theatrical talents may, undoubtedly, be heightened, and improved, by the aid of the mind. But how far the mind can assist musical performance is not so apparent. A delicacy of the organs which form the voice, and a facility of imitating sounds, with a little attention and application, seem to be all that is necessary to excel in *vocal music*. What is said of a good and bad ear appears to be an erroneous opinion, which has crept into repute, and become fashionable among mankind, by accident. Vocal powers lie more in execution than conception ; and the voice, rather than the mind or the ears, is chiefly employed. No irregularity of hearing has yet been discovered, which gives variety of sound to different persons, but every peculiarity of that sense has hitherto been considered only to hear better or worse, more or

less. There seems, therefore, no greater reason for ascribing imperfection in the art of singing to the irregular formation of the ears, than in painting to the squinting of the eyes.

*Ear*, however, is, perhaps, only a peculiar term for *taste*. A good ear, a quick eye, and a clear brain, is, indeed, the language of those who take the organs for the mind. As every idea of intellectual operations must be expressed by an allusion to material, there are figurative expressions current in the world, such as *a good heart*, which often, to weak men, appear real principles; and some even go the length of composing dissertations on them. Dr. Gall has written upon skulls, and much has been said on the ear for music.

To deny altogether that the mind has any part in musical performance, would, indeed, be to deny its existence. Whatever engages the body, occupies, in some measure, the attention of the mind. In the formation of every *corporeal or active talent*, a certain de-



gree of mental ability, attention, experience, and habit, must be conjoined with a particular conformation of organs. But, in many cases, the agency of the body so far exceeds the influence of the mind, that the latter is not to be mentioned in comparison with the former.

The speculative part of music is, however, to be distinguished from the practical; and a person may, undoubtedly, possess talent for the one, without having any for the other. As far as judgment and experience appear, the mind may be said to be concerned; as far as power of voice, or delicacy of touch in *instrumental music*, the body. As, however, our taste, and consequently our application and talents, depend very much upon our success, in music, the requisite powers of the mind are generally found to accompany those of the body. Music, as a science, has certainly very little compass;<sup>5</sup> and Handel, notwithstanding all his

<sup>5</sup> Language is composed of terms, formed of vowels and consonants; and it is bounded only by the qualities of na-



art and eminence, may still have been a man of no great intellectual powers. It is easy, indeed, to conceive, that great powers of mind would be inimical to musical talent; as the distinctions in music are slender, and consequently cannot be laid hold of by a mind accustomed to attend only to greater. If, therefore, music require any peculiarity of talent, it must be peculiar littleness.

*Vaulting* and *dancing* are slightly indebted to judgment, and remotely related to it. But however small a portion of mental ability may appear in them, they have not wanted their share of praise and admiration, more than the highest qualifications, and brightest embellishments, of the mind. Provided mankind be pleased, they are

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ture, which it represents, and every association of them, real or imaginary. *Music, again, is a combination of sounds so similar as to unite, and so different as to produce variety; but as there are but seven notes, it is a science of a very limited nature.*

generally little solicitous about the manner. Talents which contribute to entertainment, will always appear meritorious, however little connection they may have with the understanding. Whatever tends to produce gratification, certainly demands praise; but we cannot ascribe that to the intellect, which belongs only to the constitution.

Nothing is, indeed, more contrary to reason, than to judge of the powers of the mind by the construction of the body. It is as absurd to brand a person as a fool, because he is deficient in theatrical accomplishments, as because he cannot leap a certain distance.

As there is no peculiarity of mind which fits a person for one employment, and disqualifies him for another, what depends upon the mind will always be equally well executed, by minds of the same strength, if no adventitious cause intervene to counteract their operations. Mental talents have, indeed, little connection with the active part of theatrical pursuits. But, even i



those employments in which they are necessary, the success of one person beyond another does not always arise from intellectual superiority. Where one of two persons, possessing, upon the whole, an equal solidity of understanding, and comprehension of intellect, is, in any particular respect, excelled by the other, nothing can be more apparent than the existence of external circumstances, which cramp the powers, and divert the energies, of the mind<sup>6</sup>.

Constitutional qualities do, certainly, often operate in contradiction to intellectual talents. However different physical causes may be from moral, man, by his connection with matter, is rendered dependant

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<sup>6</sup> What is called *smartness*, is affected by the state of sensation, although it depends also on the absence of remote ideas. A person who possesses good spirits, will *do business*, with greater facility, and better, than another of a superior understanding, but of a weakly constitution. Wit also frequently decays with animal spirits, as it depends much upon that liveliness of feeling which commands attention, and stimulates exertion.



on the body as the medium of employing the powers of the mind. Corporeal peculiarities, among other adventitious circumstances, often mislead us in judging of the qualities of the mind. But so many foreign causes interrupt its exercise, that, perhaps, upon no subject, can it be said to be fairly exercised. At least we can never separate them so completely from it, as to judge perfectly of its native extent. The original degree of mental ability conferred on mankind, differs, it may be thought, considerably among individuals. But the causes which affect its operations are so various, as to render it impossible to distinguish this difference with any degree of nicety. Two persons are not, perhaps, to be found, between whom circumstances permit a perfectly fair comparison of natural strength of mind.

## CHAPTER XIX.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HABIT; SOME STUDIES DISQUALIFY FOR OTHERS.

**H**ABIT naturally arises from the appropriation of our talents; the appropriation of our talents, again, from the limitation of the powers of the mind.

As the mind is capable of containing only a certain number of images, its exertions must unavoidably lead to a confined mode of operation.

The *effects of habit* are not, however, to be confounded with those arising from the *degrees of ability*. The first apply to *direction*; the second to *extent*. Habit circumscribes the number of our pursuits and acquisitions; the degrees of ability, our progress in them.

When the attention of the mind is strong-

ly directed to one subject, it neglects all others, and makes no improvement, but as it has a connection with the favourite pursuit, or as the analogy of one science furnishes ideas on another. With regard to the mind, therefore, habit is of the first importance; as from this principle, may, in a great measure, be accounted for that seeming difference, in species of intellect, which is frequently met with in the world, but which appears in greater excess among the followers of literature, than those of any other profession.

Whether, in habit, the body or the mind is most engaged is uncertain. So far, indeed, as it regards mechanical arts, the question is unimportant; as every bias, or *habit of action*, impressed on the mind, must be unconsciously received, and can have no connection with reflection.

Habits of living will change the constitution of the body; and habits of thinking, the nature of the mind. But, as habit is ultimately important only by its effect on



the intellect, it seems to be more nearly related to the latter, than to the former.

All new ideas occasion difficulty and exertion, and never mingle readily with those previously acquired. As, therefore, we have an antipathy to labour, and propensity to ease, the predilection for recurring to former ideas is very naturally accounted for, by the facility with which they are re-conceived. A person has always an insensible tendency to fall into his usual train of thinking, till, at length, by dwelling on a particular set of objects, he, sometimes, creates a circle of thoughts, from which every idea arising from the other parts of nature is excluded, and in which alone he delights to employ himself, and exerts all his powers. Thus, a mathematician has no conception of the metaphors and similes of the orator, nor of the imagery and scenery of the poet, and no facility in producing them, because accustomed to look at other objects. The orator and poet, again, never think of the abstract qualities of quantity

and form, because habituated to confine their reflection within a different line of nature, to attend only to the more familiar properties of things, and those objects which immediately affect the passions.

The scope and acquisitions of the mind are certainly often very much narrowed by habit. As a material body tends in that direction in which it has been impelled, so the mind, when it has been accustomed to any particular train of ideas, continues to follow the same course of thinking, and to retrace the path which it has been habituated to tread. Thus, we always prefer a known principle to determine by ; and those things which have already received our approbation, we trust to with little scrupulosity. In the same manner, we often permit a person whose judgment we know to be sound, to dictate opinions to us ; and a very insipid jest, from one whose wit we are accustomed to admire, will command our laughter.

All education seems but habits which the mind receives. For, when once we under-



stand any subject, it requires little exertion to delineate it, or to point out its nature, and explain the most complicated combination of its qualities. The most simple ideas, without habit, appear abstract ; and, the most abstract, by habit, appear simple.

Nothing is well executed until we acquire a habit of doing it ; until we perform it naturally and instinctively, without thought or reflection. Practice produces all ease ; and the extent to which it may carry dexterity is incalculable. When we see the feats of vaulters and rope-dancers, we consider them supernatural ; when we view the performances of art, we are struck with astonishment. Works of literature appear equally wonderful. But all are the effect of habit. From this source the greatest abilities are derived, and to this point the greatest exertions ultimately come. Every attainment of the mind ends in habit. It has been said that there is a knack in making a speech<sup>7</sup>. But every

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Johnson's Character of Lord Mansfield.



talent may be called a knack. It is a knack to reason justly, to conceive fancifully, or express delicately ; that is, circumstances have concurred so as to lead the mind to acquirements, which are now become habits, and exercised with ease.

But it often happens, that, while we acquire a habit of doing one thing, we incapacitate ourselves for doing any thing else. That education which fits a person for one employment, naturally disqualifies him for a different ; and the same application which leads to one attainment, generally obstructs his progress in another.

The more intensely the mind has dwelt upon any set of objects, the deeper their impression will be engraven in it ; and the longer it has employed itself upon any subject, the more steadily will it rest upon it. Habit and application grow up together. In the pursuit of any excellence, the mind soon becomes confined to a certain mode of operation, from which, it has, afterwards, neither the power nor inclination to deviate.

Habit is always dangerous, in proportion to the progress which a person is capable of making in any science. For, it will be found, on examination, that universality of genius depends upon its moderation; and versatility of capacity upon its mediocrity. No author has, perhaps, a better claim to the character of universal genius than Voltaire. He has written both novels and plays, and is, at the same time, a philosopher, a historian, and an epic poet. In whatever he attempts, he is respectable; although his merit is never of the highest rank, nature having prohibited excellence in contrary extremes.

The acquisitions of the scholar resemble the progress of the traveller; the farther he has advanced, the farther he has to return. When a person has employed himself upon a particular subject, and afterwards wishes to bestow his efforts upon another, the nature of which requires a different mode of application, he finds an exertion necessary to dismiss former ideas, to check the impetus



of the mind, and bring it to the new pursuit. It is said of an eminent ancient teacher of music, that, from scholars, who had been under the tuition of other masters, he took double fees, because he considered the difficulty of their instruction increased by the bad habits which they had acquired. In like manner, it is evident, when we have received a branch of education, which is at variance with that to which we afterwards turn ourselves, we have to unlearn what we have already learned.

Therefore, although men of great talents, are originally capable of any thing in which the mind can be engaged; yet it is certain, that, by indulging some studies, they may disqualify themselves for others. Locke or Newton might have been as eminent poets as Homer or Milton, had they given themselves early to the study of poetry. But after their minds had been employed in abstract speculations, they became incapable of being again bended to those ornamental parts of learning, which require lighter



embellishments. Hence, we perceive why a great philosopher is not a great poet, and why a great poet is not a great philosopher ; that both might have been either ; that the poet might have been the philosopher, or the philosopher the poet.

That mind which is great, will, if exerted, exhibit its excellence on all subjects, from mathematical demonstration to lyric poetry ; and it will be found, on observation, that even the abstracted philosopher possesses the talent of wit, in proportion to the extent of his mind<sup>2</sup>. The operation of judgment is, no doubt, to separate qualities, and that of wit to unite them. Both are, however, performed by extending reflection ; and the same power which separates will join.

But great performances, as they require

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<sup>2</sup> There is a great and small wit, as well as a strong and weak judgment, or a comprehensive and narrow understanding. The wit of Dr. Johnson is not like the wit of Foote or Lord Chesterfield.

labour, lead the mind into habits. By being long employed upon one subject, it becomes incapable of bestowing its attention upon others. Intense application soon gives a characteristic to the intellect, and separates human acquirements so as to limit each individual to a single talent. Hence extraordinary excellence in any pursuit, is purchased by an equal sacrifice in others.

It is well known that many celebrated characters have appeared very different as companions and as authors, and that while they shone in books they were dull in society. Wit depends upon seizing all the relations of any particular object. This is instantly done by a mind unembarrassed, and which has its attention at command; but another, engaged in abstract speculations, requires time to accomplish it. Nothing is more certain, therefore, than that promptitude, and repartee, may be lost by an excess of study. Addison is said to have discovered, in conversation, no portion of



that brilliancy of imagination which appears in his works. The same author furnishes an instance to prove that the smallest change of habit is difficult. It appears an easy matter to one who wrote prose with such a fine vein of fancy, to have transfused the same spirit into poetry ; yet, notwithstanding the light shade by which they are separated, his poetry is cold and lifeless. The same character is given of Cicero. He likewise, with all his eloquence, was a bad poet.

Almost all inequalities of genius are to be traced to peculiarity of application. It has been remarked, that a very high degree of capacity is unsuitable to ordinary subjects. But it would be absurd to suppose, that this arose from any other cause than habit. The understanding is, in a considerable degree, under the power of will ; and where a man of talents can bring his attention to the object, he will always excel an inferior. *Natural philosophy, chemistry, and mechanics,* however useful, are certainly



neither the most difficult nor sublime of sciences ; but we have seen that they are best cultivated by exalted genius. Agreeable and *elegant trifling*, is also often found allied to superior powers ; and the *explanation of words*, *grammatical skill*, and *critical emendation*, are not less frequently the result of sagacity. But that law of the mind which prevents us from doing two things at once, renders a choice necessary ; and having chosen the higher pursuits, men of ability are excluded from all practice in the inferior.

We remain in this world so short a period, that there is hardly time to acquire a habit to that degree which constitutes excellence, instead of to change from one to another. There are also certain climacterics incident to the intellect, arising from moral causes, which no power of genius can counteract. But that all things are different to the mind only as they furnish many or few ideas, or as its habits accord or disagree with them, is certain. Could we, therefore,

admit the doctrine of transmigration, and suppose the mind to be occasionally stripped of its ideas, there is no doubt that it might pass through a variety of changes, and perform many parts; always appearing in that character which chance directs, and excelling to that degree which circumstances permit.

## CHAPTER XX.

### THE UNIVERSAL CRITERION OF GENIUS.

EVERY system is but an enumeration of facts on a particular subject. As the facts regarding mental operations are not numerous, the foregoing theory is very simple. The laws of the intellect are, indeed, so few, and so mutually dependent, that, while we speak of one, we cannot, without difficulty, avoid mentioning another<sup>1</sup>. All, in reality, exhibit only the same quality—mental energy—in different circumstances<sup>2</sup>.

It is first endeavoured to be shewn that

<sup>1</sup> *Education* is nearly connected with *labour*, *labour* with *habit*, *habit* with *appropriation* of exertion, and *appropriation* with *taste*.

<sup>2</sup> To recur once more to the subject, do not circumstances account for the different faculties of the mind? What is memory but a view of things as they are or were; judgment, as they should be; fancy, as they may be?



all single ideas are equally easily conceived, and that *number* only occasions intellectual difficulty. From this foundation, naturally follows the conclusion, that the person who can carry *arrangement* farthest, possesses the greatest mind. Next appear those external circumstances which affect mental attainment. Under the term *education*, all these may be comprehended ; first, the *opportunity* of improvement ; secondly, *labour*, or the exertion made by the mind ; thirdly, the subject on which it exerts itself, or the *appropriation* of its powers, which, again, depends upon *taste*, inclination, or peculiarity of passion, arising either from the nature of the constitution, or from circumstances<sup>3</sup> ; and lastly, *habit*, or the species of excellence acquired. Whatever else has been said in the foregoing pages, con-

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3 Taste, again, may arise from the *degree of ability*. But, in that case, cannot be included among the *circumstances* which affect the mind.

sists in explanation, the correction of errors, or in consequences and inferences.

From the equality of ideas, is inferred the *unity* of the intellectual powers.

Hence, as the excellence of one intellectual faculty is proportioned to that of another, the success of the mind would be the same in the most contrary pursuits, if the labour which great performances require did not beget habits inconsistent with it.

In estimating genius, therefore, one employment of the mind may be taken for another; judgment for fancy, and fancy for judgment, observing always to give adventitious circumstances their due weight.

Extent of genius may be discovered, in every shape, by the expanse of mind displayed. Judgment is fancy condensed, and fancy is judgment diffused. Almost every variety of literature may be characterised, both as a species of description and of discrimination. The closest reasoning, and most



abstract argumentation, are but enumerations of facts and descriptions of circumstances; while the simplest delineation of objects, or the most unadorned narration of facts, discovers a portion of method and arrangement, a certain degree of choice and rejection.

The deduction of maxims from facts, and the selection of general resemblances from common appearances, are nearly similar. Both display the mind uniformly as they discover division and connection. As things are classified and arranged, united and distinguished, comprehension is demonstrated. The degree of genius is always proportionate to extent and correctness of system, method, and plan, in every variety of employment in which the mind is engaged<sup>4</sup>. Harris beautifully observes,—“ The theory  
“ of whole and parts descends even to an  
“ essay, to a sonnet, to an ode. These

<sup>4</sup> Novelty, because understood, is not here mentioned. A plan which is a copy, can, indeed, never be great. But if any design be not original in one person, it is in another.



“ minuter efforts of genius, unless they possess a certain totality, lose a capital beauty derived from their union. Not only is this stupendous universe one whole, but such also is a tree, a shrub, a flower.” Thus those odes of Anacreon which are founded on some general thought, are the most beautiful<sup>5</sup>. What also constitutes the merit of Dryden’s celebrated ode, and what renders the “ Plutus” of Aristophanes so excellent, if it be not the integrity, or unity

<sup>5</sup> The II, the XIX, the XXIV, and the XXXI, may be referred to. Of these the XIX, although, perhaps, not the best, we give because short, and well suited to illustrate the above remarks.

“ The thirsty earth sucks up the showers,  
Which from his urn Aquarius pours ;  
The trees, which wave their boughs profuse,  
Imbibe the earth’s prolific juice ;  
The sea, in his prodigious cup,  
Drinks all the rain and rivers up ;  
The sun too, thirsts, and strives to drain  
The sea, the rivers, and the rain ;  
And nightly, when his course is run,  
The merry moon drinks up the sun.

Then give me wine, and tell me why,  
My friends, should all things drink but I ?”

of action, consequent to *generality*? The “School for Scandal” also possesses generality in an eminent degree; but the comedies of Cumberland are very deficient in this quality.

Connection and distinction depend upon the same faculty, and may both be included in discrimination. Every acute remark is the produce of an extensive experience, and the result of many ideas. When thought is condensed, much genius is comprised in few words. One page of the “*Rambler*” contains as much as six of the “*Spectator* ;” and there is, perhaps, as much thought in Montesquieu’s “*Spirit of Laws*” as is necessary to the composition of several epic poems.

It is singular, that all strong minds have a predilection for antithesis. Pope abounds with it; Dr. Johnson seldom writes without it; and in it consists the merit of the celebrated Letters of Junius. Antithesis is the excellence of both wit and judgment. The mind reasons best by contraries, the



truth of a proposition is most apparent when accompanied by its reverse, and all demonstration is distinct as it is contrasted<sup>6</sup>.

A small number of general ideas which can be expanded into many particular, is a striking indication of genius, and a multitude of particular which can be resolved into a few general, an evident demonstration of the want of it. Close reasoning and strong thinking always denote superior intellectual powers; while diffuseness, as well as want of plan, is an infallible sign of shallowness of judgment and scantiness of genius. The magnitude of mind which any piece of composition evinces, may, therefore, be estimated by trying whether it can be condensed without expulsion of ideas, in the enumeration of which attention is to be paid to those only which represent some

<sup>6</sup> By antithesis, however, is meant only a contrast of things, and not a play of words. Such expressions as, "When unadorn'd, adorn'd the most," if understood literally, are mere contradictions; and if not, "to palter with us in a double sense" is no less inconsistent with dignity than it is with candour.



combination or relation of qualities. For, as every word has a meaning, it is impossible to write without specifying objects ; but unless their relations be shewn, no wisdom can, from such compositions, be acquired. Some works are couched in terms so general and indefinite, as to fix no determinate meaning whatever ; and although they, in reality, furnish no ideas, yet the whole has an imposing appearance. Harris' " Philosophical Arrangements," seems to be a book about nothing ; and there is a treatise, called " Nettleton on Happiness," which is a still more complete specimen of this species of writing.

Those ideas which are both general and acute, minute and comprehensive, ought to rank far above those which are more obvious and simple. The wider the range is which any idea involves and gives to the mind, or the more philosophy or theory of things it contains, the more it is to be valued. By a diffuse style, a simple and light idea may be spread over many pages. At-

tention ought, therefore, to be paid not to take words for thoughts. There are works the one half of which consists in anticipation and recapitulation; in stating what is to be done, and what has been done.

A repeated idea may, however, by changing its relations, create others new; for to diversify connections, is to multiply ideas. By an unexpected turn, a common sentiment gives great pleasure, and there is often more merit in the application of a *quotation*, than in the passage quoted. Novelty, indeed, seldom extends farther than to a change of arrangement; for what is all literature but the same principles and facts, the same anecdotes and images, exhibited in different attitudes and combinations!

As the accuracy of the judgment depends always upon the expanse of the mind, a single observation is sometimes sufficient to discover genius of the highest rank, and all its rays will often appear concentrated in an individual object. Thus, the more remarks that can be made upon one proposition, or



that can arise from any particular, the more extensive must be the knowledge, and the greater the comprehension and acuteness of that mind which perceives so many relations and distinctions between it and other things, and sees it in so many different views and connections with respect to them. Of this, Butler's account of Hudibras' language is a great example.

“ But, when he pleas'd to shew't, his speech,

In loftiness of sound, was rich ;

A Babylonish dialect,

Which learned pedants much affect ;

It was a party-colour'd dress

Of patch'd and py-ball'd languages ;

'Twas English cut on Greek and Latin,

Like fustian heretofore on satin ;

It had an odd promiscuous tone,

As if h' had talk'd three parts in one ;

Which made some think, when he did gabble,

Th' had heard three labourers of Babel,

Or Cerberus himself pronounce

A leash of languages at once.”

How many different forms does the same thought here assume ! It seems to spread on every side, and unite itself to the most remote objects.



At other times genius appears in that extensive arrangement of ideas, in which each bears no prominent figure, and serves only to compose a part of one great whole. But, as comprehension is acquired by multiplying discrimination, and acuteness increased by extent of comprehension, each may be inferred from the other, and all human talents simplified into the knowledge of *relation*. Every person's genius is known by his judgment; and it is only by the quantum of thought which it contains, that all composition ought to be valued.

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## ERRATUM.

Page 228, last line, for *arts*, read *mechanical arts*.









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